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DEPARTMENT  
OF POLITICAL  
AND SOCIAL  
SCIENCES

Faith and Citizenship Among the Nur Community  
in Turkey  
A Study in Islamic Socio-Political Imagination

Maria Concetta Tedesco

Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to  
obtaining the degree of Doctor of Political and Social Sciences  
of the European University Institute

Florence, June, 2015



European University Institute  
**Department of Political and Social Sciences**

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To James



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## Abstract

Through an ethnographic study of *sohbet* meetings and patterns of civic and political engagement of the Nur community in Turkey, this thesis examines the processes through which Islamic socio-political imaginaries are constructed and subsequently turned into practice. The phrase ‘socio-political imaginary’ is used in the meaning given to it by Charles Taylor. According to the author, a social imaginary is the transformation of social theory into the profound normative notions and imagines that enable common people’s practice of society. Applying this analytical tool to the study of an Islamic community allows the researcher to fill in a gap of time and space existing in the literature about Islamic movements. In terms of time, it allows the researcher to focus the investigation on a little theorized step in the process of mobilization by religious actors that is, the cognitive elaboration of a socio-political project *before* mobilization around that project is organized. In terms of space, it grasps the intermediate level of cognition existing between the theological elaboration on politics and society promoted by religious scholars and the masses’ practical knowledge of the social realm constituted by a set of instinctive beliefs and judgments. Finally, the concept of social imaginary allows the researcher to analyse discourse and practice as mutually sustaining elements that together define a social actor’s function and position in society. Unravelling this dynamic interaction means going back and forth, both temporally and cognitively, between imagination and acts and recognizing that the discourse in itself can be influenced by the social space for which it provides a map.

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## Introduction

In a side alley of Fatih, an historical neighbourhood in Istanbul, there is a small shoe repair shop. The owner of the shop, whom I will call Ahmet, is a man in his mid-fifties who now ekes out a living as a cobbler, having sold his large shoe shop some years ago in order to gather the money necessary to send his son and his daughter to college. Besides being a cobbler, Ahmet is a devout Muslim and a member of the *Nur Cemaati* (Community of the Light), a Turkish religious community gathered around a Sunni scholar named Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, who preached in the Ottoman Empire first, and in Turkey later, between the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and 1960, the year of his death. When clients are not around and the amount of work to be completed permits, Ahmet spends his time reading and praying in the backroom of his tiny shop, where he has a bookcase full of texts on various religious topics, an old armchair, a small electric heater and an electric teapot. Sitting in his armchair, he can monitor his shop thanks to a small hole he made in the wall that separates the main room from the backroom. This hole allows him to see when customers come in so that he can enter the main room to welcome them. When Ahmet senses that his clients are prone to chat, he opens the drawer of his desk, where he has stockpiled newspaper sheets and book pages, and reads out something that he thinks they might like: a poem, an exemplary tale, a verse from the Quran or an extract from the books written by Said Nursi. Some customers graciously thank him for the reading and leave, others, instead, stay and engage in a dialogue about the meaning of life, the hereafter, ethics, and religion. In this second case, tea, biscuits and additional readings are promptly brought from the backroom to help sustain the conversation. Discussions of this kind are not restricted to clients, as many in the neighbourhood visit Ahmet's shop not for shoe repair, but because they want to talk or read books with him.

Collective readings of religious texts followed by comments and discussions or religious debates based on previous, individual readings are a common practice among Muslims in Turkey, and shops like the one owned by Ahmet, which function, in a more or less systematic way, as centres of religious reasoning can be found all over the country. Pious Muslim women are also involved in such activities, although usually not in public spaces like shops. For example, in a private apartment a few blocks away from the shop, Ahmet's wife, who also belongs to the Nur community, meets every Tuesday morning with other

community female members to make *mantı* (Turkish ravioli). The women then sell the ravioli to people in the neighbourhood, with the aim of collecting money that they use to fund college level scholarships for needy students. These ‘*mantı* meetings’ always start with collective prayers and are followed by readings of religious books. Besides being directed at both male and female believers, these study sessions of religious texts can be integrated into everyday work or social activities, as in the cases of the shoe repair shop and the making of ravioli, or can be held as separate events, independently from other communal activities. They can be spontaneous and informal, when prompted by a conversation between friends or between a shopkeeper and his clients, or they can be formally prearranged, when meetings are held regularly at specific times and places. In this case they are called *sohbet* (conversation in companionship)<sup>1</sup> or *ders* (lesson).

This phenomenon is not a recent development brought about by the Islamic revival Turkey has been witnessing over the last decades. Although the number of places in which *sohbets* are systematically held has increased significantly in recent times, such places are not only longstanding, but also ensured the underground survival of Islamic discourses, practices, and social webs during the first decades of the Turkish Republic, when the Kemalist secularisation process was at its peak and the presence of Islam in the public sphere significantly reduced. Several proponents of the Turkish Islamist movement recall in their memoirs the ethical and spiritual education they received during their youth thanks to the *sohbet* meetings and lessons they attended, often at night and in secret, with elder Muslim companions (Özemre, 1994; Kırkıncı, 2004; Karaman, 2008). Furthermore, *sohbets* are a specific (Turkish) configuration of a larger phenomenon that goes well beyond the borders of Turkey and extends across the entire Muslim world, that of the ethical training of the self through religious reasoning. The practice can assume different forms – cassette sermons, lessons in mosques, or discussion groups on social media – in different geographical or historical settings<sup>2</sup>, but always hinges on reflections about Divine truths, which eventually leads to the comprehension and interiorization of Quranic dictates.

With regard to the Turkish context, some authors have pointed out the instrumental use that Islamist parties in Turkey, in particular the Welfare Party, have made of the *sohbet* to

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<sup>1</sup> The term *sohbet* in modern Turkish simply means ‘conversation’. In the context of Sufi practice Silverstein translates it as ‘companionship in conversation’, pointing out that in Arabic the term *sohbet* derives from the same root of the word *ashab* or *sahaba* ‘companion’ and that the two terms are part of the same semantic extension. *Sohbet*, according to the author, is what by definition companions do (Silverstein, 2010: 139).

<sup>2</sup> See for example Mahmood, 2005 and Hirschkind, 2001b.

enlarge their consensus base, with party activists combining *sohbets* with the distribution of coal, food, and clothing, among the poor families they aim at recruiting to the party's ranks (Tuğal, 2009: 61). Other scholars have underlined the crucial role that *sohbets* have in forming the Muslim self and establishing effective modes of Islamic sociability. Silverstein, for example, defines *sohbet* as 'a technique of ritualised discourse and an example of Islamic discipline aimed at constituting a virtuous disposition toward ethical practices and avoidance of sin' (Silverstein, 2010: 26). In his work, the scholar focuses on the cultivation of the relationship that is built during the act of oral transmission. Such a relationship is based on affection and is liable to form in the believers' dispositions towards ethical behaviour and avoidance of sin. The relational aspect of *sohbet* is indeed very relevant, especially when it is practiced in Sufi brotherhoods. Trimingham (1998) and Schimmel (1976) insist on the notions of fellowship and discipleship to explain the function of *sohbet*, whereas, according to Algar, *sohbet* consists of benefiting from the presence of the *shaikh* (spiritual leader of a Sufi brotherhood) and fellow disciples in a ritual of companionship regulated by clearly defined standards of behaviour (Algar, 1992: 213).

Despite the fact that *sohbets* are recognised as a significant practice, in the literature surprisingly little attention is given to their content. In other words, while *sohbets* have been analysed from the point of view of resource mobilisation and Muslim sociability, we still do not know exactly what kind of knowledge is produced and transmitted through them. It is acknowledged that during *sohbets* participants are imparted with the ethical criteria that represent the normative foundation of their social action and are provided with religious everyday meanings through which they interpret and make sense of the social reality that surrounds them (Yavuz, 2003). And yet, little or no research has been directed at trying to explain what precisely these meanings and criteria consist of and how they are employed in social life. It is on this missing insight that my initial academic curiosity was focused. This project, thus, started with a very basic question: What do Turkish Muslims talk about during *sohbets*?

During the first year of my Ph.D. programme the Arab Spring erupted, bringing with it hopes of change, demands for a new political arrangement of society, and claims articulated in terms of democracy, freedom, rights, and dignity. While watching the news about the revolts in Arab countries, I found myself speculating about what the people who flocked into the streets – from Tunisia to Yemen – really meant when they said they wanted democracy, what form of governance they had in mind, what meaning they attributed to citizenship,

what kind of rights they were asking for and what was, in their worldviews, the foundation of those rights. I wondered about what role – if any – the Islamic faith had in shaping their political judgments and in providing normative grounds, not only to their claims, but also to their actions. As these questions were popping into my mind, my interest in the study of *sohbet* increased. My train of thought was the following: if *sohbets* equipped participants with cognitive tools to interpret the social reality around them – as scholars and prominent Turkish Muslims have argued – then an attentive examination of their content could offer a deeper understanding of Muslims’ worldview – not only religious but also social and political – at grassroots level. I had the sense that investigating the elaboration and diffusion of Islamic criteria informing Muslims’ views and actions, although limited to a particular context (the Turkish society) and to a particular group (the one that I would choose to focus on), could help in reconstructing the cognitive process through which Muslims around the world learn to be, at the same time, believers and citizens.

The present work aims at investigating precisely this cognitive process. While not denying the relevant aspects of *sohbet* pointed out by other scholars, it takes collective reading of religious texts as a form of education to citizenship independent from state institutions. The issue is approached through an ethnographic study of a Turkish Sunni Islamic community, the *Nur Cemaati* (Community of the Light). As stated above, the community was founded by Bediüzzaman Said Nursi at a time between the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the Turkish Republic. Its main religious practice is the collective reading of the *Risale-i Nur*, a *tafsir* (Islamic exegesis) of the Quran written by Nursi between 1910 and 1950 and composed of fourteen books. The reading sessions of the *Risale* are interchangeably called lessons (*ders*) or *sohbets*. Since their core activity is the study of the *Risale-i Nur*, members of the Nur community call themselves ‘Nur students’ (*Nur talebeleri*). The places in which the reading sessions of the *Risale* are held are instead commonly called *dershane* (literally, places of lesson). The community proved to be a particularly fruitful standpoint to investigate the issue of ‘faith and citizenship’ because in the *Risale* Nursi provides a sophisticated theory of state and society based on Islamic principles, which is internalised by community members during *sohbets* and subsequently turned into practice through the community’s social and political engagement.

The members of the Nur community were viewed with distrust by the exponents of the Kemalist establishment in Turkey, who accused them of representing an obstacle to the modernisation of the nation – considering them as defenders of backward and reactionary



social views – and of posing a threat to the Republican regime. Their meetings were prohibited during the first decades of the Turkish Republic. Many members of the community were imprisoned and some of them were forced to emigrate. The repression, however, softened after 1950 and disappeared completely after 1980. The prohibitive environment of the first decades of the Republic did not cause the disappearance of the *cemaat*. On the contrary, not only did it manage to survive, but after the 1960s, through a remarkable organisational effort and mobilisation of resources, it established newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, television and radio channels, schools, dormitories for students and grant institutions. Moreover, with changing socio-political conditions it built ties with politicians and government representatives and engaged in public debates, thus becoming an influential actor in the Turkish public sphere.

It is very difficult to ascertain the total number of Nur students in Turkey, since there is no formal membership and registration in the movement. A newspaper article published at the time of Said Nursi's death, noted that Nur students numbered more than one million (Akşam, 24 March 1960). Cemal Kutay (1970: 14) states in his study of Said Nursi that their number in 1980 was well over one million or close to two million. Finally, according to Yavuz (2003:11), the number of Said Nursi's followers today numbers more than six million.

With regards to social composition, the Nur movement is transversal to social classes and it is very diverse in terms of geographical provenance and cultural background, gathering together peasants from Anatolia and urban poor, rich provincial businessmen and exponents of city educated elites. Originally the bulk of the movement was made up of *esnaf* (a social category comprising small shop keepers and artisans) from the periphery of the nation and peasants, not because the Risale appealed to them in particular, but for practical reasons. During the first decades of the Republic, the provincial *esnaf* and peasants were indeed two social classes that were not under the direct control of the secularising and westernising state and had ampler margins of manoeuvre compared to police officers, public servants, or teachers. With the softening of persecution, however, the Risale reached, as stated above, different social groups in different parts of the country.

Once I had individuated the object of the ethnographic study, I started to look for an analytical tool that would grasp the process of knowledge production and transmission unfolding during sohbet, and found it in Charles Taylor's idea of social imaginary.

According to Taylor, a social imaginary is ‘what enables, through the making sense of, the practices of society’ (Taylor, 2002: 91); it is a way of imagining and using social surroundings that belongs to ordinary people and that posit the imagination and the use of the social realm in a relationship of mutual influence. Following Taylor’s conceptualisation, in this thesis I consider discourses and practices, theories and actions as shaped by each other. Accordingly, I aim at connecting the formation of certain ideas to certain contexts but also at assessing the constructive force of ideas in producing social change. The thesis will be then an attempt to reconstruct the cognitive process through which, during sohbet meetings, Nur students interiorise a specific socio-political imaginary founded on the thought of Said Nursi and the dynamic interplay existing between this imaginary and community members’ collective social and political action.

Bearing in mind this interaction between discourse and practice, when I started my fieldwork I was primed to investigate the historical evolution and the contemporary narratives and modes of action of the community, through the analysis of its institutional-structural and discursive-intellectual patterns and the assessment of its (evolving) relation to the secular state. What I downplayed was the profoundly theological dimension of Nur students’ worldviews, which was naïve of me because, after all, what I intended to study was an Islamic socio-political imaginary.

To be more specific, when I began my research, I had a clear idea in my mind that the people I was going to work with considered religion as first and foremost faith, and not as an identity they happened to take on, a culture they belonged to, or a political tool they could use. I knew that the belief in Allah and in the Prophet Mohammed was for them the departure point for any possible reasoning about the individual and society. And yet, I could not have imagined how deeply embedded into religious tenets their views about politics and governance were. As soon as the initial phase of trust-building was over, anxious to collect data and begin my reconstruction, I started to ask questions that were more or less along the following lines: ‘According to you, what should be the functions of the state?’, ‘Do you trust state institutions?’, ‘What is your take on secularism?’, ‘What is your idea of democracy?’, ‘Can you give me a definition of freedom?’, ‘Can you give me a definition of justice?’. To these straightforward inquiries Nur students gently responded that I was going too fast, that I was skipping too many steps in the learning process, and that I had to first work on and fully understand what they refer to as the ‘the truths of faith’ (*iman hakikatleri*). I mistakenly took those responses as an uneasiness to engage in a conversation about controversial topics in a

country where Muslims' political ideas were still distrusted. Nevertheless, without any other choices, I did what they said and explored, with their help, the principles of belief they were talking about.

With time, I realised the meaning of their objections to my initial, premature questions: it is not possible to understand Muslims' views on the organisation of society (that is, the relationships among men), governance and citizenship, without having a good grasp of the Islamic doctrines about the relationship between men and Allah, the way Allah governs the universe and the limits that He poses on men's ability to act according to their free will. There are, for example, several logical passages in the Nur students' socio-political imaginary that from the definition of personhood leads to the characterisation of the state, and each one of these passages is based on theologically grounded arguments. Thus, a significant part of the thesis will be aimed at describing all of these analytical steps that together make up a coherent system of thought formulated by Nursi and endorsed by the community.

The structure of the thesis mirrors the concern of assessing Nur students' socio-political imaginary in a way that simultaneously grasps its profound theological complexity and the tension between the understanding and the practice that unfolds during its formation. Chapter 1 provides the theoretical and analytical framework of the thesis. It presents a review of the strengths and deficiencies of the major trends in the study of political Islam – modernisation theory, political economy, social movement theory and the debate about Islamic democracy – and shows how an in-depth analysis of the content of *sohbet* could contribute to filling in the gaps left by the current literature. Then, it moves on to assess Taylor's definition of social imaginary and the way in which this concept is employed for the analysis of Nur students' socio-political views. Finally, through a reflection on classical and post-modern anthropology, it clarifies the research methods used in the field.

Chapter 2 aims at delineating the history of the Nur community from its foundation to the present, focusing on the different patterns of engagement with the state the movement resorted to in different historical phases and on the internal and external factors that contributed to the movement's progressive increase in recognition and power after an initial phase of exclusion and persecution. Chapter 3 presents a 'map' of the community that highlights the role the Risale-i Nur play in keeping the community together after the death of Said Nursi, the informal and flexible structure the movement adopted to cope with an initially

hostile political environment, the way in which *sohbets* are organised, and the mechanism through which decisions are taken within the movement.

Chapter 4 presents a detailed description of the community's socio political imaginary. It traces the logical trajectories that go from the establishment of the proper relationship between the believer and his Lord to the construction of democracy, from the eternal laws of the universe to the nature of the state, and from a reconciliation of Divine destiny with free will to an Islamic theory of social action. In sketching this theological-political reasoning it reveals a conceptualisation of citizenship that has its foundational element in faith. Chapter 5 answers the question of how Nur students' socio-political imaginary is embedded into practice. It disentangles the apparent paradox of the community's official stance of rejection of politics and its de facto political engagement. By doing this, it shows how the movement's political behaviour derives from a narrative that is itself influenced by practice.

Finally, Chapter 6 outlines new research perspectives by drawing a comparison between the community and the Italian Catholic Focolare Movement. The comparison revolves around the two movements' development of new forms of religiosity and new spiritually grounded approaches to state and society. Here the aim is to show that the innovations proposed by Said Nursi in terms of religious practices and socio-political views are expressions of a larger phenomenon of renovation of faith that goes beyond the borders of Islam.

# **Chapter 1**

## **Towards an understanding of Islamic socio-political imaginaries**

This chapter is meant to ‘set the stage’ for the empirical analysis that will be carried out throughout the thesis. It aims at putting the present study in the context of recent and less recent developments in the literature about Islamic movements, at clarifying the meaning of ‘social imaginary’ and its analytical utility, and at elucidating the methodology used during the ethnographic research. I will start with review of the strengths and deficiencies of the main approaches to the study of political Islam: rationalism and modernisation theory, political economy, social movement theory and the debate on Islamic democracy and moderation. Such a review will assert the need to engage in a study of Islamic socio-political imaginary in order to fill in the gaps left open by the various approaches. I will then move on to discuss Charles Taylor’s understanding of social imaginary and the way this concept will be used here. Finally, I will recall methods and strategies used while in the field.

### **1.1 Modernisation theories and Post-Enlightenment rationalism**

Since the number one problem in the study of contemporary Islam has been its relationship with modernity, I will start with a discussion of the ways in which modernisation theories have been applied to Muslim societies. My claim is that in order to fully understand Islamist discourses and practices it is necessary to detach the analysis from the Weberian paradigm that considers bureaucratic rationality as a precondition to modernisation and from Western post-Enlightenment theories according to which rationality itself can be achieved only if a divinely inspired authoritative order is erased from the public realm. The thesis dwells on the work done in this respect by Andrew Davison (1998) and Roxanne Euben (1999) who propose respectively a redefinition of the concept of modernity and a reconsideration of the role that metaphysics plays in politics.

Over the last decades the religious revival occurring in the Muslim world has brought about a reconsideration of the way in which Muslim societies have been impacted by modernisation. Before the relatively recent wave of Islamization it was assumed that with the advent of modernity Islamic worldviews were fading away and were being replaced by secular-rational

ways of thinking and producing knowledge. This view had been supported by modernisation theories, according to which, in order for societies to modernise they need to establish what Max Weber (1968) called 'rational' social forms. The latter are attained when society develops through successive and progressively higher stages based on different systems of production and hence on different forms of social organisation (Parsons, 1977; Apter, 1965). According to this model, changing economic dynamics would give rise to new enlightened classes that would serve as agents of change. These classes would be dedicated to destabilising and eventually dismantling old social structures based on traditional authority relationships and would eventually contribute to the birth of the modern nation-state. Along the process, loyalties to the new nation-state would substitute old loyalties based on ethnicity and religion, and the individual would be emancipated from the constraining modes of conducts of the traditional social world, and become a free citizen of the new modern state. A vital part of this development was supposed to be the disappearance of religions as cognitive schemes or 'sacred canopies' (Berger, 1967) legitimating traditional institutions, family arrangements, and primordial allegiances.

In the light of these theories, some culturalist scholars ascribe the popular support of Islamist movements to the persistence of traditional religions in Muslim countries, which, precisely because of this persistence, are unable to let go of traditional social structures and institutionalise rationality in the form of bureaucracy. Thus, some scholars regard current Islamic movements and their leaders as characterised, respectively, by traditionalism and charismatic authority (Debb, 1992; Dekmejian, 1985), or consider them as the natural outcome of popular religiosity (Nasr, 1998). Other scholars attribute the success of Islamism to the intrinsically political nature of Islam (Lewis, 1993, Huntington, 1996). Others see the resurgence of Islam as a by-product of a rejection of modernity, intended as the rationalisation of society, economy, and politics (Vatikiotis, 1981). All of these arguments imply that Islamist movements are directly connected to social processes that occur in opposition to western bureaucratic rationality.

I believe that in order to assess the role played by religion in Muslim countries we need to move beyond what Davidson (1998) calls a 'transition-by-replacement' model of modernity. With this definition, the author points towards an understanding of modernity as a distinct period in history that marks the end of the old (the traditional) and the beginning of the new (the modern). This critique of the notion of modernity as a temporal rupture – shared by Bendix (1967) and Bhambra (2009) – implies a reconsideration of the assumption that

modernisation unfolds through fixed, progressive steps that bring about new social formations completely distinct from the old ones. As Davison argues, it is important not to impose a strict notion of transition, according to which tradition and modernity are temporally juxtaposed and mutually exclusive, in order to appreciate the role that (recast) traditional loyalties perform in highly modern contexts.

As hinted at above, the study of Islam has been influenced not only by the perceived need to establish bureaucratic structures, but also by the post-Enlightenment intellectual tradition that denies the contribution that religiously inspired epistemological certainties can give to the formation of the modern public sphere. This trend has been outlined particularly well by Roxanne Euben, who criticises the Western discourse for its total disregard towards the relevance of metaphysics and metaphysical truths in contemporary political life. According to the author, contemporary political theory is embedded in ‘post-foundational’ or ‘anti-foundational’ discourses – that is, narratives anxious to ‘construct a just society without the transcendent foundations thought to have previously sustained it’ (Euben, 1999: 3). Consequently, in her view, ‘the reflex to dismiss fundamentalism as irrational or pathological is not merely a product of the almost habitualized prejudices and fears operative in the relationship between “the West” and “Islam” but [...] also a function of the way a post-Enlightenment, predominantly rationalist tradition of scholarship countenances foundationalist political practices in the modern world’ (Euben, 1999: 14). The attitude that Euben condemns has indeed been influential in the study of Islamic activism and has resulted in the binary view of the rational versus the irrational, the Western versus the Islamic, the modern versus the traditional. This duality, in turn, has dismissed Muslims scholars’ argumentative methodology and use of logic as ‘inferior’ to the western-rational ones.

We cannot make sense of contemporary political Islam if we do not engage in a serious study of discourses and practices that, contrary to the Western post-Enlightenment political thought, see faith and theology as the supporting elements of political life. Giving serious consideration to these Islamic argumentations in favour of what Euben calls ‘foundational politics’ is crucial to overcome the limits of the application of modernisation and rationalisation theories to the Islamic context. This critical exercise will lead to the encounter, not only with ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt, 2000), but also with ‘multiple rationalities’.

Thus, this thesis is devoted to the study of Islamist actors’ articulation of modernity and their calls for a reintegration of the divine order into the political realm. The thesis is also based on

the conviction that, in order to comprehend the reasons behind Islamism's success, it is necessary to analyse not only the way in which modernity and rationality are re-conceptualised by Muslim scholars, but also the way in which they are intended by Islamists at the grassroots level. It is indeed important to recognise that Islamist theoretical discourses, even though initially formulated at the scholarly and leadership level, percolate down to the rank and file participants in the Islamist movements and inform their political attitude and praxis. Here the analytical tool of socio-political imaginary as formulated by Taylor becomes useful. As will be explained later in this chapter, this concept enables us to grasp the passage of political-theological discourses from the intellectuals to the common people and to observe their functioning in everyday life.

## **1.2 Political economy**

In studies based on political economy, political Islam is treated as an epiphenomenon of deeper socio-economic structures and conditions. More specifically, the causes of Islamic activism are seen in the following factors: disenfranchisement and unfulfilled expectations that are pervasive to modernisation in developing countries; rapid urbanisation coupled with lack of accessible resources; the simultaneous increase of education and rise of unemployment; growth of anti-Western sentiments; psychological insecurity, and intolerance of the uncertainties derived from unstable economies (Fisher, 1982; Abrahaian, 1989; Ayubi, 1991; Keddie, 1991).

Regarding the issue of why these claims started to be expressed in an Islamic form, the authors that resort to arguments of political economy point to the emergence of a specific class characterised by particularly conservative tendencies; the failure of the secularist and leftist regimes to ensure wealth and political inclusion; the inability of alien ideologies from the Middle East to appeal to large sectors of society and to put an end to authoritarianism and corruption; and the lack of political tools for the expression of discontent in societies which are not yet fully democratized (Ayubi, 1980; Ibrahim, 1980; Ansari, 1984; Burke, 1998).

With regard to Turkish context, some authors argue that in the context of globalisation of the world economy and neo-liberal economic restructuring, the emergence of a conservative business class and the adoption of a business mentality by conservative religious groups are



the factors that made possible the rise of a powerful Islamist movement and its political representation (Öniş, 1997; Keyman and Koyuncu, 2005; Gümüşçü, 2008, Gülap, 2001, Can, 1997b). Other scholars see the success of the JDP in its ability to build a cross-class alliance that brings together urban and rural poor with the business sector that benefited from the neo-liberal policies adopted by the country after 1980 (Öniş, 2006; Keyman and Öniş, 2007).

To sum up, according to these trends in the literature, while social, economic, and political disenfranchisement is what fuelled political Islam in Arab countries and Iran in the '70s and '80s, it was economic empowerment that made possible the resurgence of Islam in Turkey in the '90s and 2000s. Moreover – so the argument goes – while marginalisation and exclusion from economic opportunities in Arab countries and in Iran gave birth to radical, revolutionary Islamist movements, economic empowerment in Turkey opened the road to a moderate and pro-state form of Islam.

These studies contribute, on the one hand, to the understanding of the political and socio-economic circumstances in which political Islam thrived; on the other hand, however, by individuating the origins of Islamist movements in structural dynamics and in the failure of different secular political projects, they strengthen the disregard of Islamic principles, ideas and meanings as part of a substantive, coherent and legitimate worldview. In other words, these explanations fail to see action as the expression of a system of meaning and do not take into consideration the power of ideas, the relevance of faith and the actors' normative commitments.

As Roxanne Euben underlines, in the study of Middle Eastern politics the interpretative and descriptive approach of authors that puts an emphasis on ideas and meanings and the methodology that supports causal explanations focused on social and economic conditions are often seen as antithetical. As meaning and function are mutually sustaining, the author continues, the historical, cultural, political, and economic factors are necessary to understand political phenomena. But, by the same token, the strength of political Islam cannot be taken only as an index of socio-economic discontent or socio-economic empowerment: it is also an indicator of the moral force of political-Islamic ideas themselves (Euben, 1999: 14). Accordingly the focus on Islamic socio-political imagination is intended to complement, not substitute, explanations based on political economy. It balances out what is missing in the

latter: an examination of Islamist political behaviour and the motivations behind it that is not detached from Islamists' own understanding of action.

### **1.3 Social Movement Theories**

Analysts of Political Islam in Turkey and in the Islamic world have often made use of social movement theories, focusing on resource mobilisation or on opportunity spaces. In the first case, scholars focus on the tactics and frames used by Islamist activists to mobilise people around their cause (Burke and Lapidus, 1988; Wickham, 2002; Wiktorowicz, 2004). The second approach instead ascribes the revival of Islam to internal discord among previously powerful secular elites, the emergence of new, educated enriched and conservative elites, the success of religious institutions' policies for assistance in the context of weak welfare states, the diminished ability of the secular state to silence opposition, and the demise of centre parties that had historically attracted the vote of the religious conservatives (Çarkoglu, 2006; Tepe, 2006; Zubaida, 1989; Yavuz, 2003).

Resource mobilisation theories have been criticised for aiming at explaining not the ideas, principles and motivations that inform participation in political processes, but the strategic choices that make mobilisation possible, thus 'neglecting those aspects of experience that shape the interpretation of interests, individual and collective, and affect the very capacity of actors to form groups and mobilize' (Cohen, 1985: 688). As Cihan Tuğal puts it, while correctly emphasising the relevance of tactics and discourses, networks and resources, and highlighting institutional factors that contributed to the success of Islamist movements, scholars that use these theories 'do not embed these dynamics in social formation and socio-political imagination' and 'avoid analysing the imaginative constructions of political projects' (Tuğal, 2009: 21).

Moreover, this literature is often based on an understanding of Islamist movements primarily as contentious movements and as undertakings in opposition to the State. Wiktorowicz, for example, defines Islamic activism as 'the mobilization of contention to define Muslim causes', claiming that such a designation is broad enough to accommodate the varieties of claims and summons that frequently emerge in the name of Islam. According to this view, 'collective actors respond to grievances, use institutional and organizational resources to muster support, and propose mobilization frames rooted in symbols, discourse and practice,

often designed to evoke a sense of injustice' (Wiktorowicz, 2004: 2-3). In a similar vein, it has been claimed that Islamist movements act as agents of change and further the development of a modern and liberal civil society since they challenge the authoritarian states in which they operate (Hefner, 2000; Norton 1995; Özdalga and Person, 1998). As Berna Turam (2004) argues, two factors have contributed to the view of Islam as opposed to the state: the definition of civil society as a locus of criticism towards state policies and state institutions, and the presumed incompatibility between Islam and secular nationalism<sup>3</sup>, derived by the association of Islam with the transnational *Umma* (Muslim community of believers)<sup>4</sup>.

In the literature that makes use of resource mobilisation theory and opportunity spaces with regards to Turkey, a systematic analysis of the Turkish Islamist movement starts from the Eighties, when the military regime that took power after the 1980 military coup enforced economic liberalisation and imposed a new official state ideology based on a synthesis of Islamic and Turkish values (*Türk-Islam Sentezi*), thus creating the propitious conditions for the Islamist movement to rise. In restricting the analysis to the post-1980 period, these works do not shed light on the process that made possible the existence of 'potentials for mobilisation' at the moment when new opportunity spaces opened up. In particular, while acknowledging the importance Sufi brotherhoods and religious communities had in keeping Islamic claims alive, albeit underground, these studies dismiss their role quickly, without engaging in any further analysis.

Banu Eligur, for example, applies Verta Taylor's concept of 'movements in abeyance' to Turkish Sufi brotherhoods. The term refers to movements that, when faced with an unfriendly or hostile social and political environment, do not disappear but develop 'abeyance structures'. This means that their activists withdraw within a niche in the society and maintain a collective identity thanks to a covert reinforcement and re-affirmation of activists' networks, aims and strategies (Eligur, 2010: 6). Despite this initial recognition, the author then devotes the entire book to the analysis of mobilisation strategies used by Islamist parties, without devoting any further attention to religious communities. Similarly, Hakan Yavuz (2003), after

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Gellner, 1996; Eickelman, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Hirschkind, 2001a. Also note that there are some notable exceptions to this trend, represented by scholars who have studied the political interactions between the Islamists and state institutions at the national level. See for example Akan, 2012; Cizre Sakallıoğlu, 1996; Davison, 2003; Çınar, 2005; Tuğal, 2009; and Turam, 2007.

defining Sufi brotherhoods as ‘the matrix of the Turkish Islamist movement’, does not go on to explain the role that Sufism played in the formation of the contemporary Islamist movement in Turkey.

In the literature about Islam in Turkey, another branch of research is represented by apologetic works that aim at presenting the emergence of ‘moderate Islamic movements’ as a healthy development and a much-needed challenge to the Kemalist authorities. In these works, the lack of attention to socio-political imagination, that is, to the actual content of Islamist discourses, results in verdicts about the nature and the social function of Islamist movements that are not substantiated by concrete data. Hakan Yavuz, for example, presents Turkish Islam as a force that, having endorsed liberal and ethical values, has become able to provide an alternative to the authoritarian Kemalist policies and is capable of promoting diversity by integrating different ethnic groups. He thus sees Turkish Islamist movements as agents of a ‘bottom-up political change in which civil society wants to expand the boundaries of the public sphere and make the political institution representative of the people rather than of the official state establishment’ (Yavuz, 2003: 257).

Similarly, in his study of the *İskenderpaşa* community (a Turkish Sufi brotherhood), Brian Silverstein claims that Warner’s notion of counter-public does not apply to the case of the Turkish Islamic public for two reasons. First, most observant Muslims in Turkey consider Islam to be primarily a matter of personal choice and private belief. Second, they have sided with the liberalisation of political discourses and practices, considering it as the process that brings about good governance. What Muslims oppose, he argues, is not the secular state, but the statist illiberal Kemalist establishment (Silverstein, 2010). The problem with both these arguments is that the conclusions are not supported by clear evidence, as the author does not explain what these liberal Muslim values consist of, how they are formed, propagated and internalised, and how, in concrete terms, they impact society.

To sum up, just as in the case of the political-economy based approach, the present work is not intended to go against social movement theory, but simply to supplement it. As I have argued, what I find to be lacking in the works that resort to this theoretical framework is an in-depth analysis of the process that precedes political engagement, both from a temporal and from a cognitive point of view. This overlooked temporal and cognitive step is the construction and interiorization of a political project before the mobilisation of resources aimed at putting that specific political project into practice takes place. This thesis aims at

analysing both the stage of elaboration and the stage of mobilisation by assessing the Nur movement's socio-political imagination and its interaction with state institutions. It also recognises that the production of political ideas does not happen in an abstract, a-temporal space, but unfolds in specific socio-historical circumstances and is very much influenced by that setting. For this reason, attention will be given to that context, seen as the frame that both constrains and enhances collective narratives.

#### **1.4 The debate on Islamic democracy and Islamic moderation**

The effort to disentangle Nur students' socio-political imaginary will also allow me to discuss one of the big issues of the contemporary debate about Islamic resurgence – the relationship of Islam to democracy – with an approach that is different from the one usually employed. Discussions on this topic have been powered by the fact that in recent decades Muslims around the world have started to express their aspirations to freedom, political inclusion, and equality in terms of 'democracy'. Thus, references to democracy have become dominant in the political discourses of both the elites and the masses. Still, we do not know exactly what different social actors in different Muslim countries mean by democracy.

In the attempt to understand the increasingly widespread allusions to democracy by Muslim political parties, state institutions, and social movements, observers have split into two main groups. Some have questioned the *bona fides* of Islamist groups that declare themselves in favour of democracy. Others, recognising that Western democracy itself is not a fixed and uncontested concept, and acknowledging that there can be different routes to democracy, have kept an open mind about the possibility of establishing democratic regimes in Muslim societies.

These two groups have also made their voice heard with regards to the Turkish context. In the aftermath of the 2002 electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party, some analysts have insisted on what has been called the 'free election trap' that is, the risk that the party was only pretending to endorse democracy but was, in fact, practicing *taqiyya* (dissimulation of religious views) and taking advantage of free elections in order to impose, once in power, its hidden theocratic agenda. Other observers, on the contrary, have welcomed the electoral success of the JDP as a breakthrough in the democratisation of Turkey. The JDP, with its respect of democratic procedures, support for the process of European integration, lack of

references to the Islamic state, and insistence on the fact that strict secularism is a hindrance to the promotion of liberal policies, has been regarded as a virtuous example of the possibility of integrating Islamic values into a democratic system (Hale and Özbudun, 2010; Yavuz, 2006).

Despite recognising that there can be non-Western experiences of democracy, scholars seeking to define ‘Islamic democracy’ – both in the West and in the Muslim world – still worked within the epistemological domain of Western political theory, that is, considered democracy primarily as a Western concept, which could, nevertheless, be flexed in Islamic terms. Just to give an example, in response to the question, ‘What strategy should Arab and Muslim intellectuals pursue to democratise their society?’ Eqbal Ahmad, a Pakistani Muslim intellectual, offered the following answer: ‘One must make an effort to understand the past, understand it with compassion, sympathy and criticism. The reason I am stressing that, is that many of us, Arab and Muslim intellectuals, know more about the West, more about modern history, more about the ideas of the Enlightenment, than what we do about our own [history and culture]. No significant change occurs unless the new form is congruent with the old. It is only when a transplant is congenial to a soil that it works. Therefore, it is very important to know the transplant as well as the native soil’ (quoted in Hashemi, 2003: 49).

Following this approach, several edited books take the form of a conversation among Muslim and non-Muslim theologians and political philosophers on Islam’s role in the public sphere, and on various Islamic concepts that can help define Islam’s role in governance, in an attempt to build an ‘authentic’ Islamic theory of democracy (Al-Hibri, 1992; Muqtedar Khan, 2006; Stepan, 2001). These works try to find notions in the Quran and in the Islamic jurisprudence that can provide a foundation to democratisation. They underline how concepts like *shura* (consultation), *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *ijma* (consensus) can be used to legitimise a parliamentary system, thus being the underpinning of an ‘Islamic way to democracy’. Concepts like *ikhtilaf* (disagreement) and *fitnah* (civil disorder) are instead used to justify the ideas of pluralism and political opposition. The landmark of these work is still the secular liberal tradition, in the sense that they attempt at measuring Islamic forms of democracy against the ‘original’ Western model.

Another deficiency of the current debate about Islam and democracy is the absence of attention to the views and opinions that lay Muslims have with regard to democracy. Often analysts focus on ideas and formulations about democracy elaborated by religious scholars or

by Islamist movements' leaders, showing a commitment to texts (the Quran, or the Quranic commentaries written by religious scholars) and show a lack of interest in what these texts mean to rank and file Muslims in their everyday life (Tamimi, 2001; Feldman, 2008; Abdelkader, 2011). In works that instead focus on the concept of democracy held by Islamist movements or Islamist parties' interpretation of values and ideas, that is, the meanings that religious and political concepts have for the people who endorse them, is assumed rather than investigated.

Trying to find a solution to this pitfall, Esposito and Voll state that, 'since democracy is an essentially contested concept, it is important to understand the perception of democracy within the movements of the current Islamic resurgence' (Esposito and Voll, 1996: 14). In a similar vein, Sadiki notes that 'very little has been done to present a map of the discursive terrain of democracy by non-state actors'. His book asserts that the departure point for treating a contested and problematic question like democracy in an Arabo-Islamic context must be 'an exploration of how Arabs themselves understand, imagine and view democracy' (Sadiki, 2004: 7). Both works introduce the reader to the interpretation of Islamic concepts that can be used both to support and reject democracy, and complement this reconstruction with an historical analysis of Islamist movements' engagement with the political systems existing in their countries and their involvement with or opposition to democratisation processes in their societies. The merit of these works – as well as of Stepan's analysis quoted above – is to show how different thinkers can interpret the same concepts differently and how the actions of Islamist movements oscillate between democratic and authoritarian tendencies. However, what is left unexplored, despite the books' premises, is the idea of democracy that Muslims have at grassroots level.

Comparative quantitative researchers that take into consideration the opinions and world-views of lay Muslims, seem to be preoccupied with the need of showing that Muslims are, in fact, open towards Western institutions. Hassan, for example, demonstrates that, while Muslims may be critical of American foreign policy, they admire Western-style democracy and want economic development and improvements in education (Hassan, 2002, 2008). Saikal shows that the majority of Muslims worldwide, while not approving of the policies pursued by the Bush administration, rejected the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers (Saikal, 2003). Finally, Joppke illustrates that while Muslims living in Western countries may often be disappointed and frustrated, they usually do not take a stance of political antagonism towards their host environment; and in France, despite the struggle over the right to wear headscarves

in public schools, the majority of Muslims regard French democracy as successful (Joppke, 2009).

The attempt at making Islam acceptable to Western eyes can also be found in works that concentrate on the definition of moderate Islam and the role it can play in bridging the divide between Islam and the West. These texts present the upsurge of this kind of Islam as a solution to the political and social problems Muslim societies are facing in the current historical era (Muqtedar Khan, 2007; Ebaugh, 2010; Esposito and Yavuz, 2003; Abdelkader, 2011). They have the limitation of adopting the prevalent dichotomy between ‘bad’, i.e. radical and violent, Islam, versus ‘good’, i.e. moderate and peaceful, Islam. These categorisations are untenable because, as this thesis will show, characteristics usually associated with radical Islam, such as the will to implement shari’a law, and characteristics usually associated with moderate Islam, such as respect for democratic procedures and free elections can simultaneously be found in Islamist movements.

The present work argues that a better strategy to understand what Muslims mean when they say that they ‘want democracy’ is to reconstruct Muslims’ socio-political imaginaries. This different approach presents three analytical advantages: first, it helps to understand the significance that democratic discourses and practices have for Muslims at grassroots level; second, it ensures that Islamic theories of democracy are analysed *per se*, that is, without measuring the compatibility of Muslim political ideas with Western-liberal conceptions of democracy and secularism; third, instead of hoping for the rise of moderate Islam and the decline of radical Islam, it recognises that these definitions are based on slippery ground.

When operating the methodological shift of substituting the search for an Islamic route to democracy with an analysis of a Muslim socio-political imaginary at grassroots level, one has to keep in mind the complexity of the concept of democracy and the multiplicity of elements it is made up of. Being in favour of democracy does not necessarily mean having a secular-liberal understanding of freedom and justice and, vice-versa, having an Islamic understanding of freedom and justice does not necessarily mean being against democratic elections and a parliamentary system of governance. This suggests that for the study of the political imagination of Islamist movements breaking down the idea of democracy in its components – i.e. republicanism, secularism, freedom, rights and justice – would probably constitute a more fruitful approach than taking democracy as a unitary theory to be adopted or rejected as a whole.



The Nur Community proved to be a particularly fertile ground to analyse the issue of Islamic democracy through the lens of socio-political imagination for a variety of reasons. First, during collective readings of the Risale, Nur students discuss and truly internalise the state philosophy developed by Said Nursi in his commentary. This philosophy is entirely based on Islamic principles and does not borrow concepts and ideas from the Western tradition. Moreover, in Nursi's political theory, democracy is a theological need, in the sense that it stems from the correct understanding of the relationships between men and Allah and among men. It is not something that Muslims *might* import, but it is something that they *must* achieve if they want to live in society according to the commands of Allah. Finally, Nursi's views cut across the distinction between radical and moderate Islam, displaying features traditionally associated with both.

### **1.5 *Sohbet* as a cognitive practice**

In practical terms, studying Nur students' socio-political imaginary means analysing how they understand the role of the state and the principles according to which this role should be defined, how they envision the relationship between state and society and the rights and duties of citizens, and how they define key concepts like rationality, good governance, democracy, justice and freedom. This understanding is carried mainly through *sohbet* meetings, but also through magazines and radio programmes published and broadcasted by the community. As a consequence, this thesis is primarily a study of Nur students' *sohbet* meetings. The choice to take *sohbet* as a focal point allows the researcher to understand simultaneously the structural, discursive, and charismatic dimensions of the *cemaat*. It is through *sohbets* that meanings are created, transmitted and internalised and a collective identity is fostered and, at the same time, it is through *sohbets* that initial relations among adherents are established, to then be developed in a stronger network of solidarity. In the attempt to study *sohbet*'s discourse formation, I examine how individual participants are provided with cognitive maps for the interpretation of social events through reconstructed Islamic criteria, and how individual participants conceptualise themselves as a collective agent.

Eyerman and Jamison's (1991) definition of social movements as cognitive practices can be useful to characterise the structural-discursive functions of *sohbets*, despite the fact that the present work does not draw on social movement theory. The authors see social movements primarily as 'producers of knowledge' and argue that it is in the formulation and subsequent

spread of new thoughts and interpretations that a social movement defines itself in society. They propose a broad definition of knowledge, considering it as the ‘wider cognitive praxis that informs all social activities and that can be formal and informal, institutionalized and non-institutionalized, objective and subjective, professional and non-professional’. Finally, they argue that the symbolic significance of social movements lies in the fact that the latter, by creating new modes of knowledge production, function simultaneously as a challenge to the established order and as a socially constructive force. It is in this sense that I define *sohbet* meetings, borrowing the terminology from Eyerman and Jamison, as *cognitive practices*.

This thesis is also indebted to the work of authors who, attempting at explaining the growth of piety movements, have considered how people try to follow Islamic dictates in their everyday encounters with the secular world. Since at the centre of this renewed religious sensitivity there is the management of the body, these authors have shown a specific concern with the human embodiment of religious beliefs and practices (Mahmood, 2005; Hirshkind, 2001a and 2001b; Göle, 1997). They point out that ‘the primary *topoi* for this ethical labour are the body, ritual observance and the protocols of public conduct’ (Mahmood, 2005: 191). Thus, their works turn away from the traditional *topoi* of political struggles (the state, the economy, and the law) and concentrate on the thoughts and behaviours that represent for Islamists the constitutive elements of ethics. However, as they warn us, it would be mistaken to think that, since piety movements do not have the state as their main target, they have no direct political implications or are unable to produce social change (Mahmood, 2005; Göle, 1997).

The present research, while endorsing these works’ idea of ‘finding politics in unusual spaces’, proposes a shift from the focus on the everyday religious routine – daily prayers, fasting, charity donation, veiling – to the formation, through religious reasoning, of a political consciousness. Such an approach is based on the belief that Islamization does not only articulate itself in a change in everyday habits, but also in the interiorization of an Islamic view of politics and the state, and that the formation of the Muslim self takes place not only through reflections on the ethics of everyday life, but also through reflections on the ethics of governance.

Here two clarifications are needed. First, I do not intend to argue that the reading of the *Risale* is perceived or practiced by Nur students as a political activity. *Sohbets*, indeed, are not lessons in politics, and publishing and broadcasting activities are not directly aimed at politics. I claim, rather, that *sohbets*, magazines and radio programmes are ‘unusual places of

politics’ or, to use James Scott’s (1985) terminology a place of ‘infra-politics’<sup>5</sup>. Their main aim is to ‘strengthen the faith’ (*imani kuvvetlendirmek*). During these meetings participants learn not so much how to perform religious duties, but the rationale behind those practices; they learn to know Allah thanks to the study of His names, and they learn how to conceptualise the hereafter, the destiny, the relationship between the Creator and the believer. This learning process lays the ground for the interiorization of a specific state philosophy, since a certain understanding of the relationship between God and men will bring to a certain understanding of the relationships among men and hence of the legitimate modes of ruling; a certain understanding of destiny will bring to a certain understanding of collective social action and so on.

Second, this work does not follow an approach according to which ‘everything is politics’, nor does it explore the ‘every-day dimension of politics’. I do not interpret *sohbets* as an instance of the ‘tactic of presence’ – as analysed by De Certeau, or of the ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’ – as examined by Bayat<sup>6</sup>. *Sohbets* are not means used by isolated social actors in an independent and spontaneous way to express grievances and subvert domination through the practice of everyday life. They are rather prearranged and intentional social acts performed collectively by groups characterised by a cohesive identity and they relate to a specific dimension of life namely, religious reasoning and the construction of meaning. Moreover, although the meanings built during *sohbets* can be (and often are) different to those propagated by state power, they are primarily directed at the formation of the Muslim self and only incidentally target the established system.

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<sup>5</sup> Scott (1985) argues that, until recently, much of the active political life of subordinate groups has been ignored because it takes place at a level rarely recognised as political. It is necessary to distinguish, the author continues, between open and acknowledged forms of political struggle and the concealed, low-profile, and tacit forms of political struggle which constitute the domain of what he calls ‘infrapolitics’.

<sup>6</sup> De Certeau (1984) highlights the way in which collective strategies subvert the canon of the powerful, and calls this locus the ‘everyday’. In his analysis of the relationship between consumers and modes of production, he investigates ‘tactics of presence’, i.e., the way in which users – perceived as passive subjects guided by predetermined rules – re-appropriate, through their ‘ways of operating’ or ‘doing things’ the space organised for them by the system of production (for example readers can interpret in texts something different than the authors intended). Similarly, Asef Bayat (2010) focuses on ‘social non-movements’ – intended as ‘collective action of non-collective actors’ – that intertwine activism with the practice of everyday life through the ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’. These non-movements are made up of urban subjects who lack a structural placement within the system. The latter resort to ‘street politics’ to communicate discontent, that is, they make an active use of the public space that they are supposed to use only passively by simply walking, driving, or watching. Thus, the vendors who spread their business in the alleyways, the squatters who occupy public parks, the youths who control the street, the children who play in it, and the housewives who extend their domestic works outside of their homes are all involved in street politics and they forge their identities through this use of public spaces.

Finally, a clarification is needed on how religious reasoning is connected to the formation of an Islamic state philosophy and how *sohbets* play a significant role in shaping Nur students' attitudes and views not only as pious believers, but also as virtuous citizens. In his Ph.D. dissertation, Fabio Vicini (2013b), through an anthropological study of the patterns of communal life in Fetullah Gülen (an offshoot of the Nur community) and Nur communities' dormitories for students, analyses the way in which the attainment of Islamic conduct and the embodiment of moral dispositions among Nur brothers are driven by forms of reasoning that support related morals and hierarchies of the goods. He shows how the pedagogical path followed by Nur students is interrelated to reasoning practices concerning the sense of life, the meaning of being human, the place that men have in the universe and the way relations among people should be built for the organization of communal life. Moreover, relying on the work of MacIntyre (1984 [1981], 1988) and Salvatore (2007) he underlines how traditions (here intended as an ongoing set of discussions and practices that over time have been and continue to be closely interlinked and that have a common source in some foundational texts like the Quran and the Sunna) provide people with repertoires for moral reasoning around the common good. He also points out how such repertoires of thought are at the basis of the human search for patterns of inter-subjective understanding that is, ways of articulating the relationship between the self and the other (Vicini, 2013b: 5-6). Moral reasoning, then, not only substantiates Islamic practices but represents also the foundation on which a sense of community is built.

The present work is in line with Vicini's idea that in the case of the Nur and Gülen communities Islamic traditions refined by the ontological discourse provided by Nursi relate to the role that reasoning has in moral education. However, while referring to Vicini's work for a detailed analysis of forms of moral reasoning and sociability that substantiate Islamic conduct, this dissertation aims at investigating the step that, in the learning process Nur students go through, follows moral education namely, education to citizenship. The latter is still related to forms of religious reasoning insofar as it is intertwined with Nursi's elaboration on nature and the universe, the sovereignty and absolute unity of God and the essence and purpose of being human. Constant reflection on these themes aims first at instilling in community members morality and predisposition toward ethical practices and avoidance of sin. Once the moral self is formed, reflections on the same themes are expanded from the ethics of everyday life to the ethics of governance, and from the proper relationship among members of the community to the proper relationships among members of the whole society.

In this second phase of their religious education, Nur students are trained in what is considered to be by the community moral political behaviour, which is thought of as complementary to the moral behaviour of everyday life. As much as moral education is not self-referential, but is deeply connected to what Vicini, following Hadot (1995), calls a 'philosophy of life' (Vicini, 2013: 93b), education to citizenship is linked to a general 'state philosophy', and both of them are substantiated by the overarching Islamic cosmology elaborated by Nursi.

### **1.6 Islamic socio-political imagination and its ties to political theology**

So far I have argued that the idea of a social imaginary can help to fill in the gaps existing in the literature about political Islam and provide an account of the process of meaning construction that unfolds during *sohbet* meetings. It is now time to clarify the meaning and function of this concept. I use the phrase social imaginary in the sense given to it by Charles Taylor, and to it I add the adjective 'political' because in Nur students' worldview there is a specifically political component. According to Taylor's definition, 'the social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through the making sense of, the practices of society' (Taylor, 2002: 91). A social imaginary, Taylor continues, 'is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they speak about social reality in a disengaged mode [...] it is the way in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underline these expectations' (Taylor, 2002: 106).

In his essay, Taylor also makes clear the differences existing between social theory and social imaginary. First, and in contrast with social theory, the way in which ordinary people imagine their social surroundings is not often expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends. Second, usually only a small percentage of the population has ownership and control over theory, whereas social imaginaries are shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. In this regard, as Taylor notices, it is often the case that the theories originally constructed by and for a few people penetrate and modify the social imaginary of the masses. Third, the social imaginary is that common understanding that enables common practices and a collective feeling of legitimacy. The relationship between the practices and the

understanding is then twofold: ‘while the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that the practice largely carries the understanding’ (Taylor, 2002: 91).

In his essay, Taylor, after defining what a social imaginary is, proceeds with an account of the forms of social imaginary that have underpinned the emergence of Western modernity. His hypothesis is that central to Western modernity is a new conception of the moral order of society that was initially formulated by influential thinkers, but came eventually to shape the worldview of the entire society. According to Taylor, the theories of Hugo Grotius and John Locke were particularly significant in this regard. Grotius derives the normative foundation of the political sphere from the nature of its members. The latter are seen by the scholar as ‘rational and sociable agents’, who are meant to collaborate for their mutual benefit. In this context, the moral background for the construction of society has its substance in natural rights, in the sense that people have certain moral obligations towards each another. Political obligations subsequently develop as extensions of these moral bonds. Thus, political authority itself is legitimate only because (and if) it is based on a political contract that is agreed upon by individuals and that creates binding obligations between them. Locke uses this theory as a justification for revolutions that aim at dismantling the political order and as a ground for putting a limitation to the scope of government. In his formulation, rights can be forcefully asserted against power. Thus, Taylor argues, the theory of natural rights, the idea that society exists for the mutual benefit of individuals and for the protections of their rights, and the prerequisite of original consent to political power – all derived from the thought of Grotius and Locke – are crucial elements of the contemporary Western imaginary. These elements deeply influenced the development of three social forms that characterise Western modernity: the market economy, the public sphere, and the self-governing people. The modern western moral order is in conclusion the result of the changes that occurred in these three fields and that inspired Grotius and Locke’s formulation (Taylor, 2002).

In his treatise, Taylor also points out that the ‘contemporary Western social imaginary has become so dominant, pervasive, and self-evident that Western societies, considering it as the only reasonable one, have trouble seeing it as just one possible conception among others’ (Taylor, 2002: 99). The present work is precisely an attempt to account for an alternative social imaginary. The scope of my analysis, however, is significantly reduced compared to Taylor’s, in the sense that I do not aim at reconstructing the Muslim social imaginary at large, that is, a worldview shared by the entire (Muslim) society, but at describing a very specific social imaginary: that of the Nur community.

However, despite being circumscribed to the Nur movement, the social imaginary I am going to analyse displays all the characteristics listed by Taylor in his definition. First, it is not expressed theoretically but through images and stories. Second, it represents the transformation of theory – the political theology of Said Nursi – into a cognitive map of social order for ordinary people. Third, it is a shared perception that simultaneously makes practice possible and is influenced by practice. As I will point out shortly, each one of these features brings about a specific method of analysis.

Before moving on to explain the methodological procedures, however, it seems appropriate to discuss the object of analysis a little further. As it should be clear by now, in the light of Taylor's definition, studying the socio-political imaginary of the Nur community does not mean studying the thought of Said Nursi with regards to the political arrangement of society. It means, rather, to study the re-elaboration, transmission and actualisation of his thought by Nur students. In the passage from the theory to the imaginary, i.e., from the text of the *Risale* to community members' worldviews, Nursi's political theology might lose intellectual sophistication and rhetorical ornament, but it holds logical coherence and power of persuasion. This brings us to another point: studying an Islamic social imaginary also means to disentangle Muslims' views positioned at an intermediate level between religious scholars' theorisations, and 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1971), intended as the set of incoherent and spontaneous principles and norms of behaviour typical of the masses in a given society. In other words, the Islamic socio-political imaginary is something *in between* the erudition of the specialists, based on religious education, and the practical, empirical, judgments of common people, based on native intelligence, and independent of specialised knowledge.

Going back to the method of analysis, it is useful to underline three aspects of my thesis brought about by the attempt to transfer the concept of social imaginary from Taylor's political philosophy to my ethnography. First, over the course of the argumentation I will make a combined use of extracts from the *Risale*, extracts from *sohbet* meetings and extracts from the interviews, in a way that merges theological reasoning with stories, legends and anecdotes. The choice of integrating in the text excerpts from conversations with and among Nur students and tales or metaphors that circulate within the community is not a stylistic device, but responds to the need of presenting the community's social imaginary in the way that it is understood and expressed by its adherents. Second, the choice of focusing a great part of the thesis on participant observation, and a significant part of the description on *sohbet* meetings derives from the fact that they represent the exact moment when the political theory

of society is turned into a socio-political imaginary. This shift is subsequently reproduced in the community's publications, radio and TV programmes, and public conferences, but it originally occurs during *sohbets*. Third, a part of the thesis will be devoted to assessing how Nur students' social imaginary is embedded into practice, what repertory of collective action is at their disposal, and how practice and context impact on the normative precepts they resort to. This investigation aims at unravelling the double process described by Taylor, according to which social imaginary makes sense of practice, but is also, at the same time, given a particular shape in the context of practice.

To these, a fourth point should be added. Given the holistic nature of Islam, the roots of Islamic socio-political imagination are to be found in Islamic political theology. In other words, it is important not to assess Islamic political views in abstract, but to place discourses about common good and legitimate political authority in the general context of Muslim theology. This means extending the analysis to ideas and doctrines that, at first sight, are not directly connected to collective interest and governance, such as destiny, the names of Allah, individuality, the perfection of God's creation. Such an approach will reveal the profound meaning that Islamic political notions have for Muslims, even at grassroots level, and will avoid the mistake of simply looking for concepts in the Islamic tradition that can be activated to justify (Western) democracy.

## **1.7 A note on methodology**

During the first visits I made to the Istanbul İlim ve Kültür Vakfı (Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture (IİKV), an institution established by the Nur community) in order to establish contacts with Nur students, Faris Kaya, the head of the foundation, introduced me to the worldview of the group and the philosophy on which its activities are based. He explained that the Nur community was committed to the 'promotion of a peaceful and rational form of Islam'. By peaceful Islam he meant 'the religion of those Muslims who do not act against the state and who praise the major jihad (interior jihad to be achieved at individual level) over the minor jihad (exterior jihad to be achieved at societal level)'. He added that the community was not an 'Islamist group', in the sense that it was remote from 'those Muslims who jeopardize the order of the society'. To support this point, he defined the reaction of the community to the repression it faced during the first decades of the Republic as 'passive resistance'. By promotion of a 'rational religion' (*mantik dini*), instead, he meant the effort of



raising Muslims who are ‘able to integrate in the modern world, to contribute to the economic development of the nation and to act as good representative of Turkish Islam abroad’. He underlined the importance of education, learning foreign languages, and travelling around the world in order to become ‘modern Muslims’.

Once I started following the activities of the IIKV, I noticed that exactly the same introduction to the community that I had been offered was also given to the European and American scholars or journalists that came to visit the foundation. I believe this kind of discourse corresponds to a sort of defence mechanism adopted by the community (as well as by many other Islamic groups all over the world) in order to make its case heard in the court of national and international secular public opinion. The force of the secular-liberal framing categories pushes the leadership of the community to reproduce the Western dichotomy between a ‘bad Islam’ (radical and violent) and a ‘good Islam’ (moderate and peaceful) and the Western definition of rationality as conducive to modernity.

The fact that the community has built about itself a narrative adjusted to secular-liberal views and that it uses this narrative to present itself to the outside world puts the researcher in a position that is quite different from that of the ‘classical ethnographer’, who has the ‘power’ to build a discourse on isolated and voiceless objects of study. The starting point for the researcher, then, is no longer an empty notebook to be filled with annotations and observations, but an already constructed, ready to use, discourse; the informants are no longer passive, naïve community members, but skilled and conscious intellectuals who work for and hope for the reproduction and reinforcement, through the researcher, of the discourse they have built about themselves. Deconstructing the existing narrative becomes thus a preliminary step to build a critical analysis of the group under study. This situation raises, in a new light, the old anthropological issues of the power relations between the observer and the observed, and of establishing a rapport without ‘going native’, thus managing to find a balance between participation and observation.

Postmodern anthropology has offered some interesting and innovative – albeit questionable – solutions to these problems. It has called for an interactive account of the research in order to overcome the researcher’s stance of omniscient ethnographic authority. Deconstructing culture, it has promoted the representation of plural voices. To this extent, it has made an important advance in modes of ethnographic writing. Nevertheless, the methodological changes it proposes are not always entirely suitable for the study of Sufism. I will discuss

these issues below. In the discussion I will try to show the importance for my case study of finding an approach that combines the helpful insights coming from postmodern ethnography with more traditional ways of conducting fieldwork.

The first innovation proposed by theorists of postmodern ethnography is the transformation of the erstwhile subject of research into ethnographers' collaborative partners. The invoked alteration of the role of the observed is based on the recognition of the fact that it is not possible to harmonise observer and insider perspective to achieve consensus about an 'ethnographic truth'. Rejecting the position of the neutral scientist objectively collecting data from respondents as an alienating process reliant upon a hierarchy between researcher and researched is of utmost importance. However, we should not fall under the delusion that ethnography dissolves power relations and that we can become 'at one' with the people and can still carry out research. The research process is never fully egalitarian and, precisely because of the impossibility of unifying the observer and observed's points of view, it cannot even be truly collaborative. Pnina Werbner's (2003) experience with a Pakistani Sufi brotherhood is a painful confirmation of this: after years of close collaboration with the shaykh and the prominent members of the brotherhood – not only in the field, but also during the phase of writing – she was asked to burn her manuscript and never to publish it. Thus, the ethnographer's task must be, on the one hand, to strive for self-awareness with regard to the power of the ethnographic setting and, on the other hand, to take into consideration the possibility that the final version of the research will not fulfil the expectations of the people met in the field.

The second innovation is the adoption by the researcher of a 'situational identity' (Agrosino and Mays de Pérez, 2003) based on membership. This claim is connected to the idea that in the postmodern world people are insiders or outsiders by degree and that membership in any community or category comes in shades of grey. Brotherhoods are social organisations with clear-cut borders, where the only possible alternative to the status of outsiders is conversion. Thus, it is on the basis of this 'condition of stranger' that all the fieldwork must be constructed. In this respect, the ethnographer must struggle constantly for a critical balance between responsiveness and detachment. Ethnography requires some degree of empathy, connection and concern for the people under study and the attempt to appear scientifically neutral and unconnected is likely to be counter-productive. Spontaneous and culturally appropriate reactions to experiences in the field can open doors to new levels of understanding (Bayard de Volo, 2010). Nevertheless, it is fundamental that empathy does not

turn into an excessive fascination, thus losing a critical stance toward the social discourse and the religious practices of the community. One needs some distance to be able to report any possible mismatch between discourse and practice and to evaluate critically the role of the community in the society.

Finally, postmodern anthropology claims that researchers need to be aware of factors like gender, religious belonging, class, or age, and not to minimise them as maintained in classical ethnography, but to integrate them creatively into the research. I am convinced that, while it is important to be aware of the fact that the ambivalent contacts between the observer and the observed critically shape the research, personal experience should not become the main focus of observation and interpretation. This stance comes from a realistic approach to ethnography that acknowledges the role of the ethnographer in co-constituting the reality under study but does not assume that the ethnographer's presence will always meaningfully alter the mechanism being observed (Allina-Pisano, 2010). What the researcher must do is use her knowledge and familiarity with the context to reflect upon the specific ways in which her presence is likely to have shaped the evidence. The key elements for understanding the potential biases introduced by the researcher's presence are self-reflexivity and contextual knowledge, not a shift in the focus of observation.

In addition to participant observation, I used interviews. As in the case of participant observation, the use of interviews requires some reflection about the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. Some authors have tried to move beyond a positivistic approach towards interviewing that considers the respondent as a 'passive vessel of answers', from which the interviewer will try to extract accurate and uncontaminated information. This approach is substituted with another method, called active interviewing, that sees the respondent as an epistemologically active subject engaged in the production of knowledge. In this case, the aim of the interview is not the collection of data, but the generation of meanings as a result of the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee (Holstein and Gubrium, 2002).

Active interviewing did not seem appropriate to me for the purposes of my research. I consider the process that leads to the creation of meaning to be as important as the meaning itself and I understand identity formation as a long-term social process in which internal dynamics interplay with external political influences. Precisely for that reason, I needed to understand narratives that are collectively produced by sohbet circles and individually

internalised by the single members in a process of multiple and complex interactions among competing social forces, and not the meanings that are constructed *in situ* as a product of the conversations between me and my interviewees. Just as I believe that in participant observation the focus should not be on the interaction between the observed and the observed, I think that during interviews the focus should not be on the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Again, as for participant observation, I preferred to take a more ‘realist’ position toward interviews, since I believe in the possibility for interviews to convey answers that, although not the objective truth about social reality, mirror collective identities and collective practices of justification.

Given this general approach, respondents were divided into two categories: key informants and rank-and-file participants. In both cases, Turkey being a highly polarised society where Islam is viewed with suspicion by some sections of the population, establishing what Weiss (1995) calls a ‘good interviewing partnership’ with the respondents and listening to them sympathetically was of utmost importance in order to carry out successful interviews. What varied according to the category was the method of selecting respondents and the aims of the interviews.

Key informants were selected from among what can be called the leadership of the community: authoritative figures, columnists of the magazines and reviews published by the community, directors of the associations created by the community, and members who were actively involved in politics. In this case, the objective was to reconstruct the story of the group and to understand the functioning of the power relationship within the community, the criteria according to which certain narratives are promoted at the expense of others, and the role of the cemaat promoted within society.

Rank-and-file participants were contacted through a snowball method – where the researcher asks people she has interviewed to suggest friends or colleagues to interview. In this case, the objective was to understand the density of the communities’ networks, the degree of internalisation of the narrative promoted by the leadership, the motivations driving participation, the way in which collective memory shapes collective identity and, in turn, the way in which collective identity shapes everyday behaviour. Questions were asked on a more personal level, aiming at grasping the particular points of view of the individuals involved in sohbet circles.

A final reflection regards the interpretation of the respondent's answers. The researcher must be aware of the existence of broad social narratives in order to interpret individual statements intelligently and situate them within a field of socio-scientific knowledge. For this reason, it may not always be possible to meaningfully interpret the texts of open-ended interviews without the type of knowledge that ethnographic research can provide. Because of the existence of social narratives, the texts that result from open-ended interviews have a form that precedes their content (White, 1987). A social scientist seeking to discern individual experience or counter-hegemonic discourse must know that form well enough to distinguish the ritual speeches that capture the *Zeitgeist* from individual speeches that mean to convey information about specific experience (Allina-Pisano, 2010).

As a third source, I used discourse analysis based on the assessment of the periodicals, books and pamphlets published by the community as well as an evaluation of the public statements made by its prominent members. A focus on the use of language provides insights into the way speeches and texts help to shape and reproduce social meanings and forms of knowledge. A starting point was to locate key categories, themes and terms and to pay attention to the repetition of keywords, phrases, and images in order to highlight the general framing of the texts. Then an analysis was carried out that accounts for the 'what' – substantive information, the 'how' – narrative procedures and style of writing, and the 'non-said' – topics that are omitted. Finally, patterns of variation within the texts were examined to highlight the work that has been done to reconcile conflicting ideas and to cope with contradictions or uncertainties.

At this point, a few words need to be dedicated to the issue of gender. Being a female researcher engaged in the study of a community that practices, although not in a very strict way, gender segregation, I had to find a way to 'cross gender' and reach both male and female informants. On the field there were two obvious problems. First, as a woman I could access only *sohbets* directed at women. Second, it was hard to find female Nur students who would agree to be interviewed because the majority (but not the totality) of Muslim women abide to standards of modesty according to which they do not grant interviews and do not allow their voice to be recorded. I solved the first problem by asking some male Nur students to record for me the *sohbets* they participated in, so that I could listen to them and compare them with *sohbets* held among women. Moreover, I was admitted for a short period of time to *sohbets* aimed at elder men, whose age allowed them to consider me as a granddaughter, and to *sohbets* held in the headquarters of the Yeni Nesil publishing house and directed at both men

and women (see Chapter 3). I compensated for the lack of a significant number of formal interviews with women by having many informal conversations with them, during which I asked questions and took notes.

Moreover, it is important to underline that while in the field I purposely avoided adding a gender dimension to the analysis and deliberately considered female informants as citizens and not as women. The understanding of religious principles and the ideas on state, society and citizenship, on which my participant observation and my interviewing focused, do not differ among male and female Nur students. Women in the movement do not give to the Nur socio-political imaginary a particular ‘female twist’. They endorse the exact same system of thought as men and are as knowledgeable about it as the men are. It would indeed be a mistake to consider Muslim women as good informants only when it comes to gender issues, because they have ideas, theories, concerns, aspirations, and hopes about the proper form of governance, the role of the citizenry and the future of their nations, just like every other member of society does.

## Chapter 2

### A brief account of the Nur Community's history: from persecution to political influence.

#### 2.1 Introduction

When I asked Said Özdemir, one of the initial disciples of Said Nursi, to describe his first encounter with his master, he told me the following story:

'I used to be an employee of the Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs). One day a person came to the Diyanet claiming that Ali, Hassan, and Hussein had informed him that he was the *Mahdi*<sup>7</sup> [...] I started to listen carefully to him and thought that what he was saying conformed to the history and predicaments of Islam [...] So I followed him and spent two years with him [...] While I was with him in Konya, I started having doubts and asked myself: "Is he really the *Mahdi*? Am I on the right path?". So I prayed to Allah to show me the way. Then I remembered that in Isparta there was an important scholar (*alim*) named Bediüzzaman Said Nursi who was a real slave of God and a big personality and I thought to bring this man [the man who claimed to be the *Mahdi*] to him to ask him if he was telling the truth. I informed my father-in-law of this decision; he came with a car from Ankara and the three of us went to Isparta. There we found the house of Bediüzzaman and knocked on the door. Sungur Abi<sup>8</sup> opened the door and the man said: "I am the *Mahdi*, I bring you greetings from the Prophet. I want to talk to Bediüzzaman". Sungur Abi replied: "The Master (*Ustad*) is sleeping; let's not wake him up" and shut the door. The *Mahdi* got angry and knocked on the door again. This time Bayram Yüksel Abi opened. The man said: "I am the *Mahdi*, I bring you greetings from the Prophet. I want to talk to Bediüzzaman". Bayram Yüksel replied: "Brother, look at the window, the light is off, let's not wake him up" and closed the door. [...] We decided to go and stay in hotel and return the next day. The next day we woke up and performed the morning pray. Meanwhile, Bediüzzaman had been informed of our visit. He said to Ceylan Çalışkan: "Go and bring them to me, but bring only two of them". Ceylan Çalışkan came to the hotel and told us he would bring only two people to see Bediüzzaman. My father in law and I looked at each other and he said: "I am not coming. You will go". So the *Mahdi* and I went to the Master. We kissed his hands, sat down, and listened to him. He asked me where I was from, and I told him I was from Tillo. He replied: "I lived in Tillo seventy years ago and I have always prayed to Allah to send me someone from Tillo to help me. It means Allah sent you". Then, since he was happy about finding someone from Tillo, he shared with us many of his memories. For example, he talked about the incident of the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1908 (see footnote 13). He narrated that the military came at him with the accusation of not being a good Muslim and brought him to the Beyazit tribunal in Istanbul. He looked out of the window of his cell and saw fifteen people being executed. In order to scare him the military told him that in a little while they would execute him as well. But Allah did not send him fear. Hürşit Paşa was at the head of the tribunal and told him: "You also were a reactionary, an obscurantist, you also wanted shari'a". There they were killing those who wanted the shari'a. The Master stood up, defended himself from the crimes he was accused of and explained that shari'a does not lead to uprising. He was acquitted [...]. In the 1920s the British

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<sup>7</sup> In Islamic eschatology the Mahdi (literarily 'the guided one') is a spiritual figure that will appear on Earth at the end of time to restore justice and the supremacy of Islam against evil forces.

<sup>8</sup> One of Said Nursi's disciples, as are Bayram Yüksel and Ceylan Çalışkan.

army occupied Istanbul. He wrote a sermon against the British that pointed out all of their cruelties. This sermon fell into the hands of the British soldiers who looked for him, but could not find him. Meanwhile, Mustafa Kemal had established a government in Ankara. Mustafa Kemal and other parliament representatives invited Bediüzzaman to Ankara. He went to the parliament and found out that most of the parliament representatives did not perform the daily prayers. He was very concerned about that. So he published and circulated a ten-point document. In this document he said that Allah had donated to the country the victory of the War of Independence and, in order to thank Him for that, people needed to obey to His command. Seeing that the parliament representatives were not taking his words seriously he left the Parliament. Mustafa Kemal came to him and Bediüzzaman said: “Paşa, paşa those who not perform the daily prayers are enemies of the nation (*namaz kılmayanlar haindir*)”. Then he saw that Mustafa Kemal was working in alliance with those who were not praying and decided to leave Ankara. Before leaving Mustafa Kemal went to him and said: “Do not go, if you stay we will make you the head of the Directorate for the Religious Affair, or a Minister”. Said Nursi did not accept the job, left and retreated for a while into a cave. After listening to all of this, I decided to become Bediüzzaman’s devotee. It was 1953’ (MeşAnk01).

From this story we learn that Said Nursi, in his first encounter with a potential follower, does not make references to the Quran, neither does he talk about Allah or reveal any divine truth. He simply recalls some memories; and that is enough to convince his interlocutor to become his disciple. His adventurous life and his fierce, fearless, and uncompromising stance toward political power are indeed one of the main sources of his charisma. In the *dershanes* people are often asked to consider Nursi as their intimate companion and friend. Members of the community like to tell stories about Nursi or to hear what his few living disciples have to say about him. Newcomers are first instructed in his biography, and then in his thought. His behaviour is taken as a paradigmatic example and as a source of inspiration, representing for Nur students a sort of ‘secondary Sunna’, after that of the Prophet Muhammad. The imitation of his habits and deeds is recommended and admired. Finally, the events of his life and his stance towards the Ottoman and Turkish authorities constitute a foundational element of the community’s perception of what its relationship with the state should be.

For these reasons, this chapter starts with the biography of Said Nursi. In summarising his life, I give emphasis to the events that contributed to shape Nur students’ worldview<sup>9</sup>. Also, I will follow the periodization used by Nur students themselves, who divide the life of Said Nursi into three phases: the ‘Old Said’, the ‘New Said’ and the ‘Third Said’. Each phase corresponds to different patterns of engagement with the state, which in turn echo different historical and political conditions. Throughout these phases, Said Nursi oscillated between political activism and withdrawing from public life, while the state authorities’ position

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<sup>9</sup> For a complete and precise biography of Said Nursi see Mardin, 1989 and Vahide, 2005.



towards him fluctuated between attempts to fight him and efforts to integrate him into the system.

The biography of Said Nursi and the history of the community during the life of its founder are followed by the history of the community after the death of Said Nursi. The description is put in the context of the historical and political changes that occurred in the Turkish Republic and aims at underlining both the internal dynamics and transformations of the community, and Nur students' progressive conquest of the freedom to carry on their activities and to express their claims in the public sphere. I argue that the Nur community's advancement toward the centre of political power and its current influence in the public sphere are due to two main sets of factors: on the one hand the community's ability to build ties with politicians, to work within the structures of the state and to adapt to an institutional context whose characteristics are those established by secularist reformers; and, on the other hand, the opening, after the transition to the multi-party system, of opportunity spaces for Turkish religious communities, derived from newly established patterns of interaction between Islam and the state. Finally, the chapter will provide the historical background to the community's current modes of engagement with state institutions and the JDP (Justice and Development Party) described in Chapter 5.

## **2.2 The First Said**

Said Nursi was born in 1876 into a Kurdish family in Nurs, a small village in Eastern Anatolia. Starting at the age of nine, he attended several *madrassa* (Quranic school) in the region in order to get his religious education and received his *icazet* (diploma) in 1888 from the *madrassa* of Bayazıt. After getting his diploma, Nursi began to travel, moving from village to village and engaging in conversations on religious topics with several local *ulama* (religious scholars). Thanks to these debates his fame began to spread among both the learned elite and the general population.

Convinced that it was necessary to reform the *madrassa* system, Said Nursi travelled to Istanbul in 1896, with the aim of presenting to the Sultan Abdul Hamid II his *Medreset-ü Zehra* project, which consisted in the foundation of a university where modern sciences and religious sciences would be combined and taught in three languages: Arabic, Turkish and Kurdish. This visit lasted a year and a half. He was unable to talk directly to the Sultan, but he

was able to establish contacts with various religious and political leaders. In 1907, Said Nursi returned to Istanbul. According to Vahide (2005: 33), the objective of this second trip to the Capital was again to obtain the economic and political support necessary for his project of creating an innovative and unconventional religious school. Mardin (1989: 79), instead, suggests Nursi went to Istanbul with the intent of presenting to the Sultan a series of reform proposals. This time, he succeeded in offering his views to the Sultan, but because of his public condemnation of the increasingly authoritarian style of government of Abdül Hamid II, he was sent to a lunatic asylum and released six months later (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 13-14).

A year later, in 1908, a political organisation named Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*), composed of different underground factions, reversed the suspension of the Ottoman Parliament by Abdül Hamid II<sup>10</sup> in an attempt to supplant the monarchic institutions with new, constitutional institutions. The act passed into history as the Young Turk Revolution. Three days after the Young Turk military coup against Abdül Hamid, Nursi delivered a speech entitled 'Address to Freedom' (*Hürriyet'e Hitab*) in Istanbul, repeating it later in Salonika's Freedom Square. Both events were organised by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), of which Nursi was initially a supporter. In this famous speech, which played a significant role in shaping the contemporary socio-political imaginary of Nur students, Nursi regarded freedom as the essence of Islam and considered constitutionalism to be a religious obligation deriving directly from shari'a. He then travelled around the South East region of Turkey with the aim of discussing the recent political events with exponents of Kurdish tribes and explaining to them the meaning of constitutionalism (*meşrutiyet*) and freedom (*hürriyet*). Those 'conversations' are collected in a book called *Münazarat*, which is still studied in the *dershanes* and represents one of the fundamental texts in Nur students' socio-political education.

In the aftermath of the coup, the CUP faced opposition from religious conservative circles, notably the lower-rank *ulama* and *shaikhs* of Sufi orders. These religious people, who were already active as a group around the newspaper *Volkan* of the Naqshabandi *sheykh* Derviş Vahdeti, organised themselves as the Muhammadan Union (*İttihad-i Muhammedi*). This group carried out a fierce propaganda against the policies of the Young Turks (Zürcher, 2003). On April 12th 1909 an armed insurrection broke out in the capital in the name of the

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<sup>10</sup> The parliament had been opened and subsequently closed by the Sultan in 1878.

restoration of Islam and shari'a<sup>11</sup>. The higher-ranking *ulama*, united in the Society of Islamic Scholars (*Cemiyet-i İlmiye-i Islamiye*), never supported the insurrection and from 16 April onwards openly denounced it. As a result of the counter-revolution, the CUP had been driven out of Istanbul, but it had kept its position in the provinces. From there it started the organisation of a military campaign against the rebels. When the CUP was able to re-occupy Istanbul, it blamed for the revolt Abdül Hamid and the religious opposition of the *İttihad-i Muhammedi*<sup>12</sup> (Zürcher, 2003).

Since 1908 Nursi had become very involved in political and social life. Between 1908 and 1910 he delivered speeches during public meetings and published articles in newspapers and journals. As a consequence of his activism, after the revolt against the CUP, Nursi was arrested and put on trial by the Military Court with the accusation of being a member of the *İttihad-i Muhammedi*. The leaders of the society were put on trial and hanged. Said Nursi was also expected to be hanged, but after his long defence speech he was acquitted (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 15). This speech, published as a booklet with the title of *Divan-i Harb-i Orfi*, is, again, one of the texts that influenced Nur students' political views.

The national resistance movement developed in Anatolia after the First World War, while the negotiations for the peace treaty between the Ottoman Empire and the Allies were going on. Its main adversary turned out to be not France or Britain, but Greece. With strong support from Britain, Greece was granted the right to occupy the area around Izmir in 1919. In the following years the Greek invasion of Asia Minor took on massive proportions. The treaty of Sevres, signed with the Allies on 10 August 1920, left the Ottoman Empire only a small state in northern Asia Minor with Istanbul as its capital. Eastern Thrace and the area around Izmir were given to Greece, while the Straits were internationalised. Italy received the southwestern part of Asia Minor as a sphere of influence. An independent Armenian Republic was created in eastern Anatolia and the rest of Ottoman provinces were divided between Britain and France. Moreover, the Ottoman Empire, under strong British pressure, accepted the Greek offer to enforce the treaty by military means. The result was a full-scale Turkish-Greek war, which lasted from 1920 to 1922 (Zürcher, 2003).

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<sup>11</sup> This episode of revolt is known as the '31 March Incident' (*31 Mart Olayı*) as 12 April was 31 March on the Rumi calendar in use at that time in the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>12</sup> According to Zürcher (2003), the liberal opposition gathered around the *Osmanlı Ahrar Firkası* (Party of Ottoman Liberals) was probably the original instigator of the revolt. Overestimating its own strength, it thought it could use the religious groups, but the latter turned out to be difficult to control.

The National Resistance Movement was led by Mustafa Kemal Pasha (Atatürk). In 1919 the last election of the Ottoman Empire took place. In 1920, when the news of an imminent British occupation of Istanbul reached Ankara, parliament representatives, under invitation of Mustafa Kemal, left the capital for Ankara. There, together with representatives elected by the local branches of the 'Society for the defence of national rights' (*Mudafaa-i Hukuk Cemiyeti*), which had been founded around Turkey during the previous years, they formed the *Büyük Millet Meclisi* (Great National Assembly), which met for the first time on 23 April 1920. Greek and British troupes were defeated in September 1922. On 24 July 1923 the Treaty of Lausanne was signed to replace the treaty of Sèvres; it provided for the independence of Turkey, but also for the protection of the Greek Orthodox minority in Turkey and of the Muslim minority in Greece.

Said Nursi was among those who supported the national struggle, believing that what was being fought was a war in the name of Islam. After repeated invitations, he went to Ankara in late 1922 and presented a speech to the Grand National Assembly, in which he prayed Allah to thank Him for the victory of the Turkish army. Despite the warm welcome he received, he was disappointed with the situation in Ankara. Before leaving Istanbul, Said Nursi had been of the opinion that the Republic would bring about the renaissance of Islam and mark the beginning of a new era. However, once in Ankara, he realised that the government was pursuing policies of secularisation, that atheistic and materialist ideas were being propagated, and that deputies were not respecting their religious obligations (Vahide, 2005: 168-171).

On 23 January 1923, in order to urge the deputies to adhere to Islam, Said Nursi published a ten-point circular that was distributed to all the parliamentarians and read to Mustafa Kemal. In this document he underlined that people who did not perform their religious duty were unfit to lead the nation. He explained that members of the National Assembly were taken as an example by the nation and common people could have two possible, dangerous reactions to their behaviour: they could either imitate or criticise their faults. That is to say, their religious duties were a matter of public concern. According to Nursi's official biography, Mustafa Kemal asked him to be a deputy for Muş, but he refused and left for Van in 1923 (Vahide, 2005: 170-171).

A few months after Said Nursi's departure from Ankara, on 29 October 1923 the Turkish Republic was proclaimed, with Mustafa Kemal as its first president, and İsmet İnönü as its prime minister. A single-party regime was established with the Republican People Party

(*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*) in power. This date marked the beginning of the ‘Kemalist Revolution’ that is, a radical programme of reforms enforced by Mustafa Kemal aimed at secularising and modernising the country. In 1922 the Sultanate had been abolished. On 1 March 1924 also the Caliphate and the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations were abolished. The same year a new Turkish Constitution was proclaimed. Ottoman shari’a courts were closed down and the state became the only administrator of private law. The office of the *Shaykhülislam* (the higher position in the hierarchy of the *ulama*) was abolished and the majority of *ulama* were forced to retire. The educational system was secularized through the ‘Law on the Unification of Education’ (*Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu*)<sup>13</sup>. According to the new educational bill, all schools were put under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education; the *madrasas* were closed down and in their places a Faculty of Divinity (*İlahiyat Fakültesi*) was established at the University of Istanbul and Prayer Leaders and Preachers Schools (*İmam-Hatip Mektepleri*) were founded for the purpose of training religious personnel. Finally, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) and the Directorate-General for Pious Foundations (*Evkaf Umum Müdürlüğü*) were established, not as autonomous organisations, but as state institutions responsible for the regulation of religious practices and pious foundations.

In 1925, the so-called Shaikh Said Revolt broke out in Diyarbakir. The uprising was the expression of Kurdish discontent due to the fact that the promises of autonomy of the Kurdish region made by nationalist leaders, including Mustafa Kemal himself, during the War of Independence were forgotten (Zürcher, 1993: 177). The revolt was led by Shaikh Said of Palu, an influential member of the Naqshibandi order. As Zürcher (1993: 178) underlines, that a shaikh, a religious leader, exerted great political influence was not at all extraordinary in Kurdistan, where the two great Sufi orders of the Qadiri and – especially – the Naqshibandi were the only organisations that transcended tribal differences.

According to two biographies of Said Nursi commonly in use among Nur Students – those of Vahide (2005) and Badıllı (1998) – Sahikh Said of Palu had requested Nursi to join his side in the revolt, but Nursi declined, replying in writing: ‘The Turkish nation has acted as the standard-bearer of Islam for centuries. It has produced many saints and given many martyrs.

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<sup>13</sup> At the time of the foundation of the Republic four types of school existed in the Ottoman Empire. The first comprised the *madrasas*, Islamic schools which aimed at the attainment of religious knowledge through the teaching of Islamic sciences. Then there were secular state schools created during the *Tanzimat* (the era of reforms comprised between 1839 and 1876) and expanded during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909). The third type was the schools established and funded by the Ottoman Jewish and Christian communities, and the fourth was the schools run by foreign Catholic and Protestant missions (Zürcher, 1993:66).

The sword may not be drawn against the sons of such a nation. We are Muslims, we are their brothers, and we may not make brother fight brother. It is not permissible according to the shari'a. The sword has to be drawn against external enemies; it may not be used internally' (Vahide, 2005: 182; Badıllı, 1998: 660)<sup>14</sup>. Said Nursi, however, was considered to be conniving with the rebels by state authorities and, once the revolt was suppressed, he was exiled to Western Anatolia. He was first sent to Budur and then, in 1926, to Barla, a remote and isolated village where, according to the authorities' expectations, he would have not attracted followers. Nursi remained in Barla for eight years and there he wrote most of his Risale.

The Kurdish rebellion was, in fact, the pretext that Mustafa Kemal and his supporters in the parliament used in order to put an end to political opposition and to take more radical measures against the expression of Islam in the public sphere and the influence of religious leaders on politics. In 1925 Sufi orders (*tariqa*) were outlawed; tombs of Sufi saints (*türbe*) and dervish lodges (*tekke*) were closed; the Gregorian calendar officially replaced the Islamic one; and Western-style hats replaced the turban and the *fez* (Ottoman head gear). In 1926 the Swiss civil code and the Italian penal code were adopted. In 1927 a law was passed that prohibited religion inscriptions on the walls of public buildings. In 1928 the Latin alphabet was adopted and in 1937 the principle of laicism (*laiklik*)<sup>15</sup> was included in the Constitution.

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<sup>14</sup> This particular episode of Said Nursi's life is a contested issue within the community, with Turkish subgroups claiming that the correspondence between Said Nursi and Shaikh Said clearly shows the lack of support by Said Nursi to Shaikh Said's rebellion, and Kurdish subgroups claiming that such correspondence never took place and that, as a consequence, it is not possible to reconstruct Nursi's opinion on Shaikh Said's movement.

<sup>15</sup> Article 2 of the 1924 Turkish Constitution stated: 'The religion of the Turkish state is Islam; the official language is Turkish; the seat of government is Ankara' (quoted in Earle, 1925: 89). In 1937, the Constitution was amended in order to suppress from it any reference to Islam and to enshrine in it the Six Arrows that is, the six founding principles of Kemalism, namely republicanism (*cumhuriyetçilik*), nationalism (*milliyetçilik*), populism (*halkçılık*), statism (*devletçilik*), secularism (*laiklik*) and revolutionism (*inkılâpçılık*). The new Article 2 stated: 'The Turkish State is Republican, Nationalist, Populist, Statist, Secularist and Revolutionary-Reformist' (quoted in Ataman, 2011: 146). The definition and actualisation of the Turkish concept of *laiklik* have been object of intense debate among scholars of Turkish society. While most authors agree that the French *laïcité* represents both literally and intellectually the historical origin of the Turkish idea the secular state, scholars are divided between those who sustain the 'separation' or 'disestablishment' thesis and those who maintain the 'control thesis' (Davison, 1998: 135-140). Authors that belong to the first group claim that with the Kemalist revolution the Turkish state cut its institutional and formal ties with Islam and completely displaced religion from the government and the public sphere (see for example Lewis, 1961; Weiker, 1985; Ahmad, 1991). The supporter of the 'control thesis', instead, using as their main argument the foundation of the *Diyanet*, define Turkish *laiklik*, rather than as the institutional separation of religion and state, as the control from above of all aspects of religious life. According to this view, Islam was put under the rigid control of and made subservient to state authority (see for example Keyder, 1987; Toprak, 1994; Cizre Sakallıoğlu, 1996; Gülap, 2005). While agreeing with the idea that the Kemalist state aimed at controlling, rather than dismantling, Islam and made an instrumental use of it throughout the years, I believe that in the perspective of the present study it is important to point out the central place that the notion of 'positive sciences' had in the Kemalist discourse of *laiklik*. This phrase was often used during the first decades of the Republic in government representatives' speeches, party

### 2.3 The New Said (1926-1948)

Up until the period of the 'New Said' it is clear that Nursi sought to promote reforms of the Islamic system of education and of state institutions through active involvement in social and political life. From 1926 onwards, however, Nursi halted political engagement, was forced by state authorities to withdraw from society, and led a solitary life of persecution. During this period, his efforts were directed at writing the *Risale*, seen as a form of direct opposition to positivism and materialism and indirect opposition to Kemalist policies, and at forming a community of followers that would work for renewing the belief of Islam.

Nursi wrote the majority of the *Risale* between 1926 and 1950, and his followers established during these years a book-copying and distribution network throughout the country. It was during this period that the group began to acquire a sense of cohesiveness and a collective identity, an essential step in becoming a religious community. During Nursi's exile in Barla, the inhabitants of the small village, despite the close gendarme watch over Sadi Nursi, smuggled his writings throughout the village and from there into other villages. Different parts of the *Risale* were copied by hand and secretly distributed among Nursi's followers, who gathered in stalls or in the houses of those who were willing to risk raids on their homes. Of the many peasants who gathered around Nursi only three were able to read and write in the Ottoman script. Therefore, parts of the *Risale* were copied on specially prepared *rahles* (small law reading desks). The tops of these desks were covered with glass through which light would shine, enabling the person, unable to read or write, to copy the page by tracing the letters underneath. (Gencel Sezgin, 2011; Şahiner, 1998: 261). The names of those who performed the duty of hand-copying the *Risale* were remembered by Nursi himself in the prayers he used to write with a red pencil at the bottom of each page written under his supervision.

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documents and school texts. In these contexts positivism refers to the modern doctrine and movement founded by August Comte (1798-1857) and based on the idea that knowledge should be derived from the observation of general laws and cause-and-effect relations in both nature and society. Although positivism was part of the Turkish national thought before the Kemalists came along, they made it a central piece of their secular aims. Accepting the positive notion that, if progress has to be achieved, scientific ideas must replace theological ones in the organization of society, they aimed at removing religion as a rationale from the sphere of government (although without fully separating religious institutions and personnel from the state), at suppressing signs of religiosity from the public sphere, and at subordinating education to the positive sciences (for a detailed discussion on the relationship between *laiklik* and positivism see Parla and Davison, 2004: 100-124). This aspect of *laiklik* is relevant for the study of the Nur community because it is precisely the alleged superiority of the positivist style of knowledge production that Nursi vehemently criticizes in his *Risale* (see sections 4.3 and 4.4).

These multiplied copies were then distributed with the utmost secrecy among villages and cities around Turkey by specially organised *Nur Postacıları* (Postmen of the Light). When it was possible, the duty of transporting hand-copied reproductions of the Risale from one village to the other was assigned to people who were less likely to attract the attention of the gendarmes: mentally disabled people, women or children. The practice of secretly copying and distributing parts of the Risale continued during the years that Nursi spent in prison; it served the function of keeping activism alive and of maintaining strong bonds of unity within the group while the leader of the community was detained by state authorities.

These foundational years hold a very important place in the collective memory of the group. Elder members of the community frequently tell stories about the people who illegally read and copied the Risale; youths listen with enthusiasm and admiration. Many of those hand-written pages with Nursi's prayer at the bottom are kept and exhibited in little museums dedicated to Nursi<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, the initial underground nature of the community influenced the way in which Nur students look at their mission. Nursi followers, indeed, claim that their job is to 'secretly spread the light [of the Risale]' (*sirran tenevverat*<sup>17</sup>), which, for them means to bring the message of Bediüzzaman to the people around them quietly and, if necessary, slowly, using persuasion and resolution as arms.

In 1934 Nursi was taken from Barla back to Isparta. Nursi's relocation, decided by state authorities, coincided with a phase in the history of the community marked by the judicial persecution of Nur students. During the hearings, Nursi and his followers were accused of forming a nationwide network of reactionaries aimed at destroying the principles on which the state was founded. Three of these trials still represent a profound wound in the collective memory of the community because of the large number of Nur students involved in them. In 1935, 120 Nur students from all over Turkey were arrested, together with Nursi, and held in custody in Eskişehir. In 1943, Nursi was detained again, this time with 126 Nur students and all were imprisoned in Denizli. Finally, in 1948 Nursi and 54 of his followers were arrested and detained in the prison of Afyon. In all of these trials the prisoners were eventually acquitted and the Risale were recognised as a book that, dealing exclusively with religious matters, did not pose a threat to the regime (Turner and Horkuç, 2009: 26-33). As a

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<sup>16</sup> There are three museums dedicated to Said Nursi in Turkey: one in the headquarters of the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture (*İstanbul İlim ve Kültür Vakfı*) in Fatih, Istanbul; one in the *madrassa* of *Rustem Paşa* in Cağaloğlu, Istanbul and one in the house of Bediüzzaman in Isparta. The museums exhibit, besides the handwritten pages by Said Nursi, some of his personal belongings and the printing presses used by early Nur students to copy the Risale.

<sup>17</sup> This phrase is mentioned in many parts of the Risale, especially in the letters of Said Nursi to his students.



consequence of the trials, Nursi's fame spread and the number of his followers increased. Furthermore, around this time, two of the first duplicating machines to appear in Turkey were purchased by Nursi students, one was set up in Isparta and the other in Inebolu, and copies of the Risale now became available on a larger scale.

## **2.4 The Third Said (1948-1960)**

Socio-political changes occurring in Turkey during the 1950s had an effect on Said Nursi's outlook and denoted the start of a new phase of his life, known as the 'Third Said'. He began to read daily newspapers again, to pay attention to social life and political developments in Turkey and the Muslim world and to express his opinion publicly about political matters. As Dursun points out, Nursi appears in this third stage of his life as a leader who was closely connected with political figures, informed governments of his appreciation of some of their measures, wrote letters to parliament representatives and met on numerous occasions with ministers and deputies (Dursun, 1995: 321).

In 1945, a peaceful transition from a single-party regime to a multi-party system was realised. In 1946 previous members of the CHP founded a new party called the Democratic Party (*Democrat Partisi*). The political programme of the new party, thanks to which it won the first democratic election of Turkey in 1950, included: strong support to rural masses; the upgrading of Turkish peasants' daily problems to topics of political discussion; and the liberalisation of religious practices and re-legitimisation of traditional Islamic values. Moreover, during the electoral campaign, the DP established political patronage relations with rural notables, managed to present itself as the party of the masses, criticised the single-party regime for having disregarded the needs and the customs of the majority of the population, and made references to Islam as the 'social cement' needed to preserve national unity and prevent the organisation of political opposition around class interests. In short, as Binnaz Toprak pointed out, the party was able to win the election because it politicised religious issues and professed priority for the agricultural sector (Toprak, 1981: 72).

On the day that the Democrats won the elections, Nursi sent the following telegram to Celal Bayar, soon to be elected as the new president of the Republic: 'To Celal Bayar, President of the Republic. We offer our congratulations. May Almighty God grant you every success in the service of Islam, the country and the nation. In the name of the students of the Risale-I

Nur, of whom I am one, Said Nursi'. To this, Nursi received the following reply: 'To Beddiuzzaman Said Nursi, Emirdağ. I was exceedingly touched by your cordial congratulations and offer many thanks. Celal Bayar' (Vahide, 2005: 309). Nursi supported the DP because he considered it as a party that, taking a strong stance against communism and irreligion, would represent the interests of the religious section of Turkish society. He described Menderes, the leader of the party, as 'the champion of Islam' (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 42) and advised his students to vote again for the DP in the elections of 1957.

Immediately after this first electoral victory in 1950, the DP promoted several measures to relax the secularist regime established by the RPP and re-introduce Islam in the public sphere: it allowed the *adhān* (call to prayer) to be read in Arabic and the *namaz* (ritual prayer) to be performed in Arabic; introduced facultative lessons of religion in elementary school; legalised Quranic schools; set up Prayer Leader and Preacher Schools (*İmam Hatip Okulları*) in seven cities<sup>18</sup>; expanded the budget of the Presidency of Religious Affairs; and authorised the pilgrimage to the tombs of Sufi saints. Nevertheless, the party's efforts to reform were limited by the general structure of the state apparatus, which was based on the principle of laicism, and by the fact that its leadership was composed of secularist politicians. Therefore, it did not grant full freedom to religious groups and its policies toward Islam remained ambiguous.

The Nur movement was affected by this ambiguous attitude toward religious communities. On the one hand, restrictions on the reading of the Risale eased and a new generation of Nur students, based primarily in Istanbul and Ankara, were able to work for the diffusion of the Risale without strict state surveillance. Moreover, Nursi himself was accorded greater freedom of movement. As a first, symbolically loaded act, he was able to join his followers in the Çarşı Mosque of Afyon for *tarawih*, the prayers on each of the thirty nights of Ramadan. The new liberties granted to Nursi allowed him to build more intense relationships with his disciples. As Vahide (2005: 334) pointed out, 'in many respects these last ten years of Bediüzzaman's life might be seen as directing and training these young students and preparing some of them to lead the Risale-i Nur movement in later years'. In particular, during the 'Third Said' phase the foundations were laid for future cohabitation in the *dershanes* and collective reading of the Risale during *sohbets*.

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<sup>18</sup> The İmam-Hatip schools, originally founded in 1924, were abolished in 1930 and re-established in 1951 by the DP government.

In 1953 Nursi moved to Isparta and here he kept company with his students in the same houses where they were living, allowing his food to be prepared by them. The cohabitation in Isparta between Nursi and his followers set the patterns of living together – based on collective performance of the daily prayers, collective reading of the Risale and equal sharing of everyday chores like doing the cleaning or preparing food – that it is still followed today by Nur students who decide to endow their lives to the ‘service’ (*hizmet*) of the community (see section 3.9) and by university and high school students who reside in dormitories run by the community<sup>19</sup> (MesIsp01; MesErz02; MesErz03; YNIst16) .

At the same time during these years the model of *sohbet* was established. Nursi began to hold formal study sessions (*ders*) for groups of students of the Risale and after 1958 he travelled between Ankara, Konya and Istanbul where, at the invitation of his students from all over Turkey, he visited the Risale study centres (*dershane*) that were springing up across the country. During these visits Nursi instructed his followers both on the ‘formal’ aspects of *sohbet* – sitting in circle and reading and commenting in turns – and on the interpretation of the most allusive metaphors he used in the text or of the most difficult theological concepts. The students who during these meetings were educated to the practice of *sohbet* held subsequently lessons with other community members or newcomers to the community and instructed them on the reading of the Risale, thus making them able to train, in turn, other students. In this way the path of ‘training the trainer’ (see section 3.8) was established and allowed for the quick proliferation of *sohbet* meetings in the country. At the same time lessons among women started to be held under the supervision of female community members who had received their education on the Risale by their fathers, brothers or husbands during private meetings in their houses (MesIsp01; MesErz02; MesErz03; YNIst16).

However, despite the changing conditions, court actions against Nur students around Turkey continued during the 1950s. For example, the public prosecutor initiated a case against Said Nursi and a young Nur student Muhsin Alev, who published a booklet in Istanbul, entitled *Gençlik Rehberi* (A Guide for Youth). The charge was that the book contravened Article 163 of the Penal Code, undermining the principle of secularism and therefore constituting illegal religious propaganda. In 1956 the court of Afyon issued the final verdict on the Risale, claiming that ‘there was nothing against the law’ in it (Turner and Horkuç, 2009: 37; Şahiner,

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed analysis of the modes of cohabitation and patterns of sociability and collective thought established in the Gülen and Nur communities’ dormitories see Vicini, 2013.

1998: 413) and subsequently returning all the seized copies. The Risale then began to be printed on modern presses in the new Latin alphabet.

Towards the end of the 1950s, Nursi was recognised as a public figure by state authorities. On 12 April 1957, at the invitation of military officers, Nursi attended a ceremony to lay down the foundation for the mosque of the third military division in Isparta. In 1958 the authorised biography of the scholar was published. Finally, on 30 December 1959, Nursi made a second official visit to Ankara. His trip to the capital attracted a huge amount of attention from the media. According to the reports of his speech to journalists, Nursi's aim in coming to Ankara was to allay the suspicion of officials and government deputies with regard to the Risale-i Nur, particularly since it had been exonerated by numerous court verdicts (Milliyet, 30 December 1959).

Although the DP took a number of measures against religious groups, it was unable to escape attacks by the RPP leaders for its indifference to the alleged rise of 'obscurantist' movements. The much publicised travel of Said Nursi to Ankara and Istanbul and his contact with DP deputies prompted members of the opposition party, in particular its leader, İsmet İnönü, to criticise the government for allegedly asking Said Nursi to make propaganda on the DP's behalf. As Toprak points out, accusations to Menderes concerning the government's supposed support of the Nurcu became the major issue of Turkish politics during the early part of 1960s (Toprak, 1981: 87).

After the visit to Ankara and some time spent in Emirdağ, preparations were made for Nursi's return to Isparta. On the way to Isparta, he stopped in Urfa, where he died on 23 March 1960. Nursi's funeral took place the following day in the Ulu mosque. The governor of Urfa, the mayor and the local garrison commander took part in it. On 27 May 1960, a military coup occurred. Several weeks later, Nursi's remains were taken from the *Halilürrahman Dergahi* in Urfa, where he had been buried, to an unknown spot in Anatolia, on the orders of military authorities. During the removal of his body the town was taken over by the army and nobody was allowed out in the street (Milliyet, 27 May 1960). Even today, it is unknown what became of the body of Said Nursi.

## 2.5 The Nur community after Said Nursi: 1960-1971

The military coup of 1960 interrupted Nur students' activities and the years between 1960 and 1965 was an era of stagnation for the movement. A few days after the coup, prominent members of the community were brought to Sivas where a prison camp had been set up for members of the DP and individuals considered by the military to be opponents of the Kemalist state (Kırkınıcı, 2004: 129-139). As a consequence, in the following years the majority of grassroots members of the community avoided hosting or participating in *sohbet* meetings, even after detained Nur students were released. However, *sohbets* were kept alive by the *ağabey*s (older brothers) of the community, namely Nur students who had collaborated with Nursi when he was alive and who were considered particularly authoritative and knowledgeable about the Risale. The latter, with the help of the few Nur students who accepted to take the risk to hold religious meetings in their houses, continued the practice started by Nursi of training community members in the interpretation of the Risale. In this way the *ağabey*s managed, despite strict state surveillance, to form in Isparta, Ankara, Erzurum and Istanbul units of people that were ready to actively work for the dissemination of the Risale once political tension softened and the number of *sohbets* held around Turkey increased (Kırkınıcı, 2004: 140-144; MesAnk02; YNIst16).

After 1960 the movement experienced both disintegration and cohesiveness. On the one hand, the community went through different splits caused by the different interpretations of the Risale or by different political attitudes and strategies. After each division the resultant groups tried to justify their position with reference to the Risale and, in so doing, they placed emphasis on different parts of the same text. The books of Said Nursi, written in different phases of his life, reflect the fluctuations in his stance towards state authorities that occurred over the years and were influenced by changing historical and political conditions. In the post-Nursi era, the lack of development by Nur students of an integrative approach between the work of the Old Said, the main body of the Risale, and the letters from Nursi to his followers, became particularly evident.

On the other hand, unity was achieved through the gathering around the *ağabey*s. Two key figures emerged within the movement. One was Zübeyir Gündüzalp, who compiled a reference book to the Risale entitled 'A Guide Book for Nur Students' Service' (*Talebelerin Hizmet Rehberi*), still used by community members as a guideline for their activities. The other was Bekir Berk, a lawyer who joined the movement at the end of the 1950s and who

was on the front line in the 1960s, a decade when lawsuits continued to be brought against Nur students. Moreover, community members began to organise themselves by introducing local consultative meetings (*istişaret*) among the adherents of each town, and national consultative meetings among representatives of the different towns, a move that served to consolidate the movement at local level and to coordinate local groups at national level.

The first *istişaret* was held in Urfa immediately after the death of Said Nursi, among Nur students who rushed to the town for Bediüzzaman's funeral. In this first meeting, it was discussed how the community should carry on Nur activities without the guidance of Said Nursi. A small group among the participants to the meeting proposed to take revolutionary actions against the government, but the *ağabey*s managed to convince them that starting a revolt was not what Said Nursi would have wanted from his community. In this assembly it was also decided that Nur students would continue consulting among each other on issues relative to the community (Kırkinci, 2004: 127; MesAnk01; YNIst16; ZehIst01; YAMar01; MeşUrf01).

The military intervention of 1960 temporarily suspended electoral politics. The military administration that stayed in power until late 1961 used religion as the ideological principle on which it based its programme of reforms, in order to obtain moral and political legitimisation and prevent any rebellion motivated by Islamic claims. A 'moderate' and 'rational' version of Islam was considered the antidote to both class struggles and religious fanaticism. The military saw Nur students as the proponents of the kind of Islam they were trying to eradicate and published, against them, a brochure entitled 'The Dispute of the Sect of Kurdish Said' (*Tuhfetür-Reddiye ala Mezhebi'l- Said-i Kürdiye*). In the booklet, the Nur movement was portrayed as a new sect outside Sunni Islam, which aimed at promoting Kurdish nationalism. Moreover, to give legitimacy to these claims it was stated that the brochure had been written by the last Sahykülislam of the Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Sabri Efendi before his death (Kırkinci, 2004: 147-148; ZehIst01; MesAnk01). At the same time, a 'Committee for the fight to Nurcus' (*Nurculukla Mücadele Komitesi*) was founded. It was composed of employees of the Diyanet and professors of theology and organised conferences around Turkey to 'explain' Nursi's version of Islam to people (Kutlular, 2009: 84-87; MesAnk01; YAMar01; YAIst02; ZehIst01).

While the military administration was in power, a Constituent Assembly (*Kurucu Meclis*) was formed and it prepared the draft of a new Constitution, which was ratified through a

referendum in 1961. A large number of its provisions pertained to the guarantee of civil liberties, among which the freedom of religious belief, worship and education were included. However, the 1961 Constitution also brought preventive measures concerning the use of religion for political ends. For example, article 19 read: ‘No individual can exploit religion in order to change the social, economic, political, or legal structure of the state according to religious principles, neither can he use religion to further his personal or political interest’. As Toprak (1981: 91) underlines, by including this provision in the Constitution, the Constituent Assembly sought to prevent the reappearance of the politicisation of religion that occurred under DP’s administrations.

Under these new conditions Nur students continued, with some variations, the pattern of political engagement established by the Third Said that is, consultation with politicians. This time, however, to intense communication with exponents of governments, Nur students added: editorial activities that served as both instrument of self-representation and a means to express publicly the community’s political views; a stronger activism within right-wing conservatives political parties at grassroots level; and a deep engagement in the intellectual fight against the diffusion of communist and socialist ideologies in Turkey.

In 1961 the first division occurred within the movement between the ‘scribes’ (*yazıcılar*), gathered around an *ağabey* named Hüsrev Altınbaşak, and the ‘readers’ (*okucular*). The scribes insisted on providing the Risale in hand-written form and in the Ottoman alphabet. They argued that handwriting made the text more human, facilitated its internalisation, developed a bond to the text by making Nur students themselves a part of the manuscript, and helped maintain the Ottoman alphabet. In contrast to this view, the readers stressed the importance of mass production and rapid distribution and argued that the Risale had started to be published in the Latin alphabet when Bediüzzaman was still alive and with his approval. As an agreement could not be found between the two groups, the scribes ‘stepped out of consultation’ (*meşveretten çıktılar*) that is, stopped participating in *istişaret* meetings and started acting and taking decisions by themselves (Kırkıncı, 2004: 164-168; Kutlular, 2009: 73-84; Zehİst01; MesAnk01; Mesİzm02; YAMar01).

During the 1960s in Turkey the opposition between secularism and anti-secularism was dragged alongside the struggle between leftist and rightist political groups, a trend that became even stronger in the 1970s. Islamist movements grew increasingly nationalist, anti-communist and conservative, thus positioning themselves at the right of the political

spectrum. Both the military and civil Kemalist leaderships continued to use Islam as an ideological weapon against leftist movements, failing to understand – as Keyman has underlined – that the latter did not pose a threat to the ideological foundation of Kemalism. Leftist parties, indeed, rejected populism and statism<sup>20</sup>, but accepted the identification of modernity with secularism (Keyman, 1995).

Nur students were on the front line of the fight against communism, considering it an ideology that led to materialism, atheism and eventually destabilisation and anarchy. In 1963 the ‘Turkish Association for the Fight against Communism’ (*Türkiye Komünizmle Mücadele Derneği, TKDM*) was established. Nur students were among the founders of the Association in Ankara and of its branches in Istanbul, Erzurum and Izmir. Moreover, many of the community’s grassroots members subscribed to the Committee. The organisation aimed at ‘enlightening’ people about the risks of socialism through conferences and booklets. Nur students, besides participating in the Committee’s activities and advertising these initiatives in their publications<sup>21</sup> and during *sohbets*, took advantage of the Association’s meetings to publicise Bediüzzaman’s view of state and politics and promote the reading of the Risale (Kırkıncı, 2004: 188-190; YAIzm02; YAIst05, YAIst10; MesIzm02; YNIst15; IndIst01; ExtIst01).

Nur students’ involvement with the Association echoed Said Nursi’s strong stance against communism. According to Vahide (2005: 238-239), for example, Nursi himself was responsible during different periods of his life of informing officials about communism. Nursi’s stance on communism is also clear in a letter where he explains the reasons behind his support for the DP: ‘If the Party of the People (*Halk Partisi*) comes to power, Communist forces will lead this nation. Certainly a Muslim cannot be a Communist; if he becomes a Communist, he will be an anarchist. A Muslim can never be compared to a foreigner. This is why, in order to prevent that a party which represents a terrible peril for our social life and our nation comes to power, I work for the protection of the Democrat Party, in the name of the Quran, the motherland and Islam’ (Emirdağ Lahikası: 120).

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<sup>20</sup> Populism and statism are two of the founding principles of Kemalism (see note 17).

<sup>21</sup> For support to the Turkish Association for the Fight Against Communism in Nur community’s publications see for example ‘*Anarşiyi durduracağız*’ (We will stop anarchy) and ‘*Gazetemiz ile TKMD. Fatih Şubesi için takipsizlik kararı verildi*’ (Our magazine with the TKMD. Non-persecution was decided for the branch of Fatih) in *İttihad*: 114, 6 January 1970; and ‘*TKMD kurultayı yapıldı*’ (The TKMD general assembly was held in *İttihad*: 140, 7 July 1970).



As hinted at above, the 1960s also marked the beginning of the editorial activities of the Nur students. From 1963 to 1971 several weekly magazines were published by the community in different towns: *İhlas* (Sincerity) in Ankara, *Bediüzzaman* and *Bediülbeyan* (The One Who Has Wonderful Words) in Konya, *Zülfikar* (The Pronged Sword of Ali) and *Uhuvvet* (Brotherhood) in Izmir, and *İttihad* (Unity) in Istanbul. With the exception of *İttihad*, none of them lasted for more than a couple of months, as they were all closed down by a court decision after a few issues came out. In order to send the magazines around Turkey, Nur students did not use distribution firms. Community members used public transportations to reach the seven regions in which they had divided the country and from where the distribution would take place. This allowed them to deliver copies of the magazines before tribunals had the time to order the police to confiscate them (YNIst15; YAIst05; YNIzm01; MesIzm02).

Nur students explain that they ventured into press activities with two objectives in mind. On the one hand, community publications aimed at protecting the Nur identity against continuous attacks, and at counterbalancing state propaganda against Nur students by presenting their point of view to the public. On the other hand, they were designed to offset what Nur students call ‘radical Islam’ (*radikal İslam*) or ‘political Islam’ (*siyasi İslam*). With these phrases they refer to revolutionary Islamic ideas inspired by the writings of Said Qutb, the Muslim Brotherhood, Abduh A’la Mawdudi and Ali Shariati, which at the beginning of the Sixties were translated into Turkish and spread across the country (Kırkinci, 2004: 233; Kutlular, 2009: 94-105; YAIst02; YAIst05; YNIst17; IndIst01)<sup>22</sup>.

A close look at the periodicals published by the community in the late 60s reveals how Nur students tried to achieve the intended goals. In the magazines great effort is spent to present Nursi’s idea on the political organization of the state and to explain some of the fundamental concepts of the Risale, like *ihlas* (sincerity), *uhuvvet* (brotherhood) and *tefekkiir* (reflective thought). Moreover, in these publications a large number of articles criticizes the Turkish leftist movement as an agent of disruption and anarchy undermining the social and moral values of the nation, and calls for the defeat and the annihilation of Communism and Socialism, not only in Turkey, but all over the world. Other articles condemn the political

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<sup>22</sup> When talking about revolutionary Islamist movements, Nur students today use the phrases ‘radical Islam’ (*radikal İslam*) and ‘political Islam’ (*siyasi İslam*) both in their daily language and in their official declarations. Since in the Nur periodicals of the 60s and 70s no direct references are made to competing Islamist views, I am not able to specify exactly what terminology was used at the time. Mehmet Kutlular, when reporting in his memoirs the debates among Nur students that brought to the establishment of the first community periodicals, uses the adjective ‘radical’ (*radikal*) to define the Islamist groups Nur students were in disagreement with (Kutlular, 2009: 97, 105). This, however, might be a case of projection into the past of a contemporary term that was, if fact, not used at that time.

behaviour of the RPP's Parliament representatives, the decisions taken by RPP led municipalities and the court pronouncements in favour of the detention of Nur students or the suspension of their activities. Such actions and statements are portrayed as attacks against Islam and against the people's right to practice religion freely. This set of articles makes clear how Nur students in their official stance considered as their opponents the Kemalist political elite (represented by the RPP) and the Kemalist civil bureaucracy (represented by the judiciary). Significantly, in this era's Nur publication the military, which have historically also been part of the Kemalist establishment, are not object of critique. On the contrary, in several issue of *İttihad*, they are praised as the heroic guardians of Islam and the nation<sup>23</sup>. The positive attitude towards the military derives on the one hand, from Nur students' wish to protect their community from further state encroachment and, on the other hand, from a sincere interiorization of a nationalistic and pro-state discourse.<sup>24</sup> In other words, Nur students by acclaiming the military and associating policies against Islam exclusively with the RPP and the judiciary, found a way to oppose Kemalism without assuming an anti-systemic stance. Finally, in the periodicals some space is devoted to cover news coming from other Muslim countries. In this set of articles, while the need for unity among Muslims is often underlined, no references are made to Islamist movements outside Turkey. Despite the fact that the publications were aimed, among other things, at contrasting competing Islamist views of state and society, the editorial line of the periodicals avoided open confrontation with and criticism of other Islamist groups and preferred instead to put an accent on the commonalities among Muslims of different countries and on the spirit of brotherhood that should be established among them.

However, while being silent on this issue in their publications, between the 1960s and 1980s Nur students defended Nursi's ideas against the predicament of fast and radical social changes through the Islamists' 'coming to power' both in the debates internal to the community and in the informal exchanges and meetings they had with members of other Islamist circles (see

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<sup>23</sup> See for example '*Diyanet İşleri Reisi Halkın Orduya Yardımını İstedi*' (The Head of Diyanet Asked the Population to Help the Military) in *İttihad*, 136, 9 June, 1970. In the article it is stated that to support the military is a national and religious duty and a meritorious act in the eyes of God (*sevap*). It is so – the article continues – because the more the military is strong the more the confidence in the future of Turkey will be solid. Another example is '*Kızıl Tahrikçilere Karşı Ordu-Millet El-ele*' (The Population and The Military Hand in Hand Against the Red Provocateurs) in *İttihad*, 140, 23 June 1970. In the article a collaboration between the people and the military against the left is invoked. Finally, see '*Türk Ordusu Müslümandır*' (The Turkish Military is Muslim) in *İttihad*, 140, 7 July 1970 and '*Ordunun İsteği*' (The Will of the Military) in *İttihad*, 11 August 1970. In both these articles the military is presented as an heroic institution embodying the Islamic and Turkish values.

<sup>24</sup> In the same vein should be read the operation conducted by community leaders of changing the *Risale* in order to erase from them any reference to Kurdish tribes and Kurdistan (see section 2.6).

section 2.6). The following legend, which has been circulating in the community since the 60s, reflects the community's pro-state, anti-revolutionary approach to politics: 'Said Qutb accused Bediüzzaman of being passive because he did not try to get power. So he sent a letter to Turkey and asked: "When is Bediüzzaman going to start a rebellion?"'. Said Nursi replied that within a nation violence and force cannot be used (*kaba kuvvet kullanılmaz*). After a while a new letter from Said Qutb came with the same question: "When is Bediüzzaman going to start a rebellion?" This time Beddiuzzaman replied that brothers cannot draw guns against each other. When Said Qutb was condemned to death, the Egyptian President of the Republic made him an offer: "If you apologise to me, I will forgive you and let you live". But Qutb replied: "A true believer cannot apologise to a hypocrite (*münafık*)". He was such a great scholar that he preferred death to compromise, but his method was wrong". Before dying Qutb is reported to have said: "Now I understand how right Bediüzzaman was""<sup>25</sup>. There is no evidence that attests to the veracity of this story, and it was probably fabricated by authoritative Nur students, but it is significant in that it is an attempt to convince community members of the strategic and ethical superiority of Nursi's approach to politics, compared to the attitude of scholars and movements who theorised (and tried to put into practice) a revolutionary road to the Islamic state.

In 1961 the first democratic elections after the coup were held. The electoral competition sealed the victory of the RPP, which formed a coalition government with the Republican Peasants' Nationalist Party (*Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi*) against its opponent, the Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*). Despite the electoral defeat of 1961, by 1965 the Justice Party had managed to create an image for itself as the successor of the defunct DP. The JP was able to inherit the legacy of the Democrats as a party representing rural interests. To the majority of the rural electorate, the military intervention of the 1960s seemed to be a reinstatement of the earlier Kemalist military-bureaucratic alliance. The JP's strategy during its formative years was to re-attract former DP supporters among its ranks, partially by functioning as a protest movement against this elitist alliance. Included in this strategy was an effort to identify the JP as the champion of Islam (Toprak, 1981; Zürcher, 1993).

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<sup>25</sup> I am reporting this story with the words of YAMar01, but I heard the same story from YAIzm01; YAIzm03; YAIst10 during formal interviews, and from several other community's members during informal conversations. I was not able, however, to find a written version of this account that could help identify with precision its origins and its original formulation. My interviewees recalled that they first heard the story in the 60s when discussions inside the community began to be held about the proper road to reach the Islamic state. It is important to notice also that the legend was passed down younger generations of Nur students and still plays an important role in the community's narrative. In two occasions during my fieldwork younger community members made reference to it in the context of informal conversations, during which they criticized Egypt's president Mohamed Morsi for promoting reforms of the state at a pace that was too fast.

Besides that, the JP elaborated a strategy of gathering support among the rural masses, which was more effective than the one adopted by the DP. The latter, indeed, had very rarely formed alliances with Islamic groups, at least not at the national level. Its tactic was to mobilise at the provincial level notables that had influence over local religious leaders. The JP, instead, established direct and long-lasting relationships with several Islamic groups and their leaders. This implied that the religious communities would vote for the JP and grant it political support in exchange for protection from the state (Ayata, 1996: 44). The party integrated in the machine of the state Islam-oriented technocrats from the provinces and members of Islamic groups. The impact of these groups on government policies was initially limited because they did not have the power to subvert existing hierarchies. Nevertheless, over the following decades their power and influence grew considerably.

In 1964, when Süleyman Demirel assumed the leadership of the JP, his religious background and the fact that he came from a pious family was strongly emphasised by the propagandists of the party<sup>26</sup>. JP's success in strengthening both the organisational network of the DP and its appeal to the religious feelings of the population are demonstrated by the 1965 election, which brought the party to power. During this electoral campaign İnönü's opposition to Demirel was reminiscent of his attacks on the Democratic Party. He accused the JP and Demirel of collaborating with the Nurcu, claiming that 'those who seek to benefit from the use of Said Nursi's sect as a vote-getting machine are obscurantist' (quoted in Toprak, 1981: 94)<sup>27</sup>.

Nur students were, indeed, one of the Islamic groups with whom the party established alliance<sup>28</sup>. The majority of Nur students during the 1960s supported the JP, by simply voting for it or by being involved in politics among the party's ranks. The community justified this political choice with the claim that the JP was the heir of the DP, the party Said Nursi had voted for and, drawing on the terminology introduced by Nursi, used the term *azam-u şer* (the greater evil) to refer to the RRP, as opposed to the Justice Party, which was defined as *ehven-i şer* (the lesser evil). According to this frame, the support the movement granted to the JP is explained in the following terms: in a context where the divine commands are not observed,

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<sup>26</sup> Demirel was elected despite Nur students' support for the other candidate Saadetin Bilgiç (Kırkinci, 2004: 161; Kutlular, 2009: 122).

<sup>27</sup> For other examples of İnönü's accusation about collaboration between Nurcu and JP, see Ahmad, 1977: 253.

<sup>28</sup> Alparslan Türkeş, leader of the Republican Peasants' Nationalist Party proposed political collaboration to Nur students, who refused the offer. The only exceptions were the scribes, who voted for Türkeş in the 1961 and 1965 elections (Kutlular, 2004: 118-120; ExtIst01).

the lesser of two evils is preferred – if it exists – in order to prevent the greater evil. Particularly significant was the involvement of Nur students in the 1965 electoral campaign, during which community's members, in order to prevent another victory of the RPP, worked hard at both local and national level to gather votes for the party (Kutlular, 2009: 121-122: YAIst10; YAIzm01, MesIzm02; ExtIst01).

Even if the JP continued the military junta's policy of using Islam against communist and socialist ideologies, its political action toward Islam was limited by the need to conform to the Kemalist nature of the state apparatus and to show no tendencies toward excessive religious inclination (Cizre Sakallıoğlu, 1996: 239-240). This meant that, despite their support for the JP, Nur students were still accused from time to time of posing a threat to the state and were brought to trial. Although neither Menderes, nor Demirel publicly denounced the Nur movement, as Weiker claims, 'in practice both the DP and JP governments have cracked down periodically on the Nurcus [...] to keep their credit at least moderately good with the more secularist elements [of the state establishment]' (Weiker, 1981: 110).

After 1965, consultation between Demirel and Nur students became particularly intense. In 1969 the Demirel administration proposed a 'law for the protection of constitutional order' (*Anayasa Nizamı Koruma Kanunu*). The bill would have limited some Islamic activities, but Nur students managed to block it. After being informed by Demirel that the party had no power to stop the bill from being approved because the military was pushing for it, Nur students started a campaign against the proposed legislation: they published several articles on *İttihad* about the restriction of freedom for Islamic activities the law would have brought; they used the JP's local branches to give speeches against the law; they organised trips all over Turkey to the Parliament where they were received in groups by Parliament representatives with whom they had ties and suggested that they vote against the law; finally, they advised Demirel to reject the law on the basis that it was incomplete, until it would be forgotten (İttihad, 1969; Kutlular, 2009: 125-131; YAIst05; YAIzm01)<sup>29</sup>.

During the 60s a group of Nur students formed in Istanbul around the *dershane* located in Kirazlı Mescit Street in the neighbourhood of Süleymaniye. The group, which in that decade was referred to as the 'Kirazlımescit branch' was led by Zübeyir Gündüzalp and Bekir Berk

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<sup>29</sup> Another example of the support the community granted to Demirel is reported in Kutlular's biography. When Demirel declared that the JP was against a theocratic state some exponents of the Turkish Islamist movement criticised him for 'betraying the spirit of Islam'. İttihad, instead, published an article explaining that the theocratic state was a state governed by the Pope and had nothing to do with Islam (Kutlular, 2009: 131-132).

and was composed of young Nur students who moved to Istanbul from the periphery of the country with the aim of contributing to the spread of the Risale in the big city. To this aim they endowed their lives: they quit their jobs and schools (they lived modestly out of the revenues derived from the sale of the Risale and the community's publications), sometimes even their family (parents or wives and children) and their names (Nursi had assigned to some of them new names, not only as a security means, but also a symbol of their new lives); they lived *commune* life in the *dershane* and invested exclusively in the movement at an early age (YNist16; Kutlular, 2009: 59-73; Gencel Sezgin, 2011: 105-106) .

This group was responsible for the publication of the weekly magazine İttihad and in 1970 started to publish *Yeni Asya* (New Asia), the first daily newspaper belonging to the community. The purposes of the new publication were to provide Nur students with an interpretation of daily events through the lens of the Risale and to continue İttihad's mission of presenting to the general public community's ideas against the opposing views of the Kemalist elite, the Turkish left and other Turkish Islamist groups (YNist16; Kutlular, 2009: 111-113). In the editorial published in the first issue of the newspaper the rationale behind the choice of the name 'Yeni Asya' is explained. According to the article, since Asia is the place where the first prophet, Adam, was created and where Islam made its first appearance, it represents the cradle of humanity, the *locus* from which civilization spread to the four corners of the Earth. Being the continent from which Islamic justice and virtue rose against tyranny and error, Asia is also the origin of democracy and republicanism. The reason why this great continent fell under the servitude of Europe is that it did not stay faithful to its essence and abandoned the Quranic dictate of consultation among people. The title 'New Asia' was then a wish and an invocation for the renewal of the Asian civilization and a return to its true spirit (Yeni Asya, 21 February 1970). After the death of Zübeyir Gündüzalp and Bekir Berk the 'three Mehmet' (*üç Mehmet*) – Birinci, Kutlular and Fırıncı – became the leaders of the group that consolidated around the Yeni Asya newspaper and hence began to be known as the Yeni Asya group.

In January 1970 the National Order Party (*Milli Nizam Partisi*), a political party with Islamist inclinations, was founded by Necmettin Erbakan. Among the ideologues of the party there were a large number of members of the Scribes group and two prominent Nur students belonging to the Yeni Asya group: Hacı Tevfik Paksu, JP Parliament representative for Kahramanmaraş and Hüsameddin Akmumcu, JP Parliament representative for Isparta. Some of the debates about the creation of a new Islamic party were held in a *dershane* called the

‘Parliamentarians’ *dershane*’ (*Parlamentarler Dershanesi*), that Nur students had established in Ankara with the aim of ‘converting’ Parliament representatives to the Risale<sup>30</sup>. However, the idea that Turkey needed a new Islamist party was not shared by everyone in the community. Before the foundation of the party, Gündüzalp called the Nur students involved in the construction of the NOP, together with *ağabey*s from all over Turkey to a national consultation. During the meeting, which lasted several days, chapters of the Risale that deal with the issue of religion and politics were discussed and a decision was taken that no Nur student would be involved in the construction of an Islamist party. As the decision was disregarded by some Nur students, the NOP – which had planned to make use of the Nur movement and other Islamic movements in Turkey – started to pressure the community to join the party. But the party did not succeed in its intent: the majority of Nur students abided by the decision taken at the national consultation meeting and the NOP was faced with severe opposition from a significant section of the movement (Kırkinci, 2004: 218-225; Kutlular, 2009: 132-141; YNIst15; YNIst17; MesAnk01; YAIst10).

Indeed, despite the fact that among the founders of the new party there were some segments of the Nur community, Nur students were responsible, along with others, for the failure of the NOP to represent every section of the Turkish Islamist movement. Many of the important figures of the movement, mainly Gündüzalp, opposed the NOP by drawing upon Nursi’s analysis of the public realm. Their critiques to the party were in line with the community’s opposition to political Islam discussed above, and were based on Nursi’s predication that in a society that is not fully religious, political parties formed in the name of Islam would lead to the political exploitation of religion. In different parts of the Risale, indeed, Nursi opposes the formations of Islamic political parties, claiming that these kinds of political formations would feed religion-based polarisation within society and hinder the transmission of the fundamentals of belief to all segments of society (Mektubat: 68-70; Sualar, 143-144).

In May 1970 the NOP was closed down, on the grounds that it violated the Constitution, specifically the articles dealing with secularism. As Zürcher (1993) points out, the closure of the NOP was adduced as proof of the even-handedness of the anti-terror campaign, but in fact Erbakan himself was not brought to court and he was allowed to resume his activities in October 1972, when he re-started the NOP under a new name, National Salvation Party (*Milli*

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<sup>30</sup> The task of connecting Nur students with Parliament representatives was mostly carried out by Tevfik Paksu in collaboration with a leading Nur student of the moment, Ahmet İhsan Genç in Ankara (Gencel Sezgin, 2011: 92).

*Selamet Partisi*). With regards to the new party, Karabasoğlu claims that, drawing upon the lesson it derived from the NOP's experience, the NSP tried to break the power and influence of the Nur movement in order to seize a space for itself within the Islamic community in Turkey. This affected the Nur movement, as some of its members became dissatisfied with the community's emphasis on belief and the individual and, in order to face the political attack levelled against them by the NOP/NSP movement, became politicised by their intense preoccupation with daily politics (Karabasoğlu, 2003: 281).

## **2.6 The Nur community after Said Nursi: 1971-1980**

On 12 March 1971, given the failure of Demirel's government to curb political violence in university campuses and in the streets, and in getting any serious legislation on social and financial reform passed in the Parliament, the military intervened again with a new *coup d'état*. The military formed a new government – headed by Nihat Erim, a member of the right wing of the RPP – that would be able to end the anarchy and carry out reforms in a Kemalist spirit. Martial law was declared in eleven provinces, including the big cities; it was to be renewed every two months for the following two years, and this situation was used by the military to cut down the activities of leftist groups and imprison their members.

In the aftermath of the coup, Nur students took a politically quietistic stance. The military intervention was, in fact, what they had been hoping for. As stated above, in the years before 1971, İttihad published several articles that praised the military as guardians of Islam and the nation, against what they considered to be the greatest evil Turkey was facing at that time: Communism. An article published in Yeni Asya on February 10, 1971, one month before the coup, written by Bekir Berk and entitled 'The voice of our military' (*Ordumuz sesi*) was explicitly in favour of the military coup, calling on the armed forces to intervene against the left (Yeni Asya, 10 February 1970; quoted also in Akan, 2011: 10).

Besides supporting the military in their publications, in the years before 1971 Nur students, in particular the group gather around İttihad first and Yeni Asya later, tried to establish cordial ties with the military. Their purpose was to protect their networks from state persecution, and their opposition to the left gave them an opportunity to build bridges with the military. In particular, Vahdettin Karaçorlu and Tevfik Paksu had close relationships with some members of the military establishment. Karaçorlu used to be a colonel, Paksu used to be a member of



the Senate which included members of the military junta that governed the country after the 1960 coup (YaIst05; YAIzm01; Gencel Sezgin, 2011: 240).

From the point of view of the internal development, the military coup of 1971 did not affect the Nur movement significantly. Several members, among whom Hüsrev Altınbaşak, Bekir Berk and Fetullah Gülen, a young charismatic scholar belonging to the community, were arrested, but were released a few months after their imprisonment. The main problem the movement faced during the 1970s was related to internal disagreement among *ağabey*s. In 1972, shortly after the military coup, Gündüzalp, who was the key figure in preserving the unity of the movement in the 1960s with his motto of unity in diversity, died and his passing accelerated the process of disintegration.

The establishment of the Yeni Asya newspaper had given rise to a debate about the nature of the community. The foundation of Yeni Asya was related to the appearance in the movement of the idea of ‘forming organizations on behalf of the community’, and of the concept of ‘institutionalized service’ (*hizmet muessesesi*). The foundation of institutions on behalf of the group was considered by some community members to be in contradiction with the background of brotherhood and the principle of a community of equals, with no ranks and hierarchies. Moreover, Yeni Asya in the early 1970s carried out a fierce campaign against the NSP. While many of the *ağabey*s complained that the newspaper had become too politicised, some members of the community, who were NSP sympathisers or activists and could not accept the criticisms of the party by the newspaper, left the movement (Kırkinci, 2004: 233-239; Kutlular, 2009: 111-117; ExtIst02; MeşIzm02; YAIst02).

According to Karabaşoğlu, disagreements related to institutionalisation increased within the community after 1971. This link between institutionalisation and division can be explained in different ways. The institutionalisation weakened the open and flexible structure of the movement by strengthening the centre represented by the institution. It produced a formal organ of publication of the Risale and, parallel to this, a central authority that attributed to itself the role of official interpreter of Nursi’s writings. This situation represented an opportunity for those dominating the institution to dominate the movement and eroded the pluralistic nature of the community. Moreover, people who did not agree with the interpretation of the institution were repudiated by the new central authority (Karabaşoğlu, 2003: 282).

While I agree with Karabaşoğlu that the group gathered around the Yeni Asya newspaper became with time more and more authoritative, it seems to be that the foundation of institutions was in some cases the effect, rather than the cause, of internal divisions, in the sense that different groups within the Risale founded their associations precisely with the aim of differentiating themselves from the rest of the movement. Moreover, with every group gathered around one of the elders that worked in strict collaboration with Said Nursi when he was alive, it seems that internal divisions are connected to a particular form of ‘dispersion of charisma’ from one single figure or pole (Said Nursi) to multiple figures or poles (the authoritative brothers). Finally, as it will become clear in the following pages, divergence of opinion among different groups of Nur students with regard to political views and strategies played a significant role in the divisions the community went through.

Two major splits occurred in the 1970s: that of the group gathered around Fetullah Gülen and that of the Kurdish section of the community. Fetullah Gülen was an Islamic scholar who studied the Risale in Erzurum under the guidance of Mehmed Kırkinci, a famous scholar and *ağabey*. In the early '70s he moved to Izmir where he started preaching and attracting followers in the Kestane Pazarı Mosque. His sermons started to circulate as cassette tapes and his followers started to read his books and to listen to his sermons during the *sohbet* meetings. Moreover, Gülen, began to act without consulting the community, or in contrast with the decisions taken during meetings of consultation. His behaviour upset the community's *ağabey*s, who considered it unacceptable to read books that were not the Risale during *sohbets* and to take decisions outside of *istişaret* meetings. Tensions between Gülen and the movement rose until 1974, when he and his followers stepped out of the community (YAIst01; YAIzm01; YAIst05; YAIzm10; MedUrf01; IndIst03; IndIst04).

In 1979, instead, a group called Medreset-ü Zehra split from the movement. The group, composed mainly but not exclusively of Nur students of Kurdish origins, accused the *ağabey*s, in particular Mehmed Fırinci, Mehmet Kutlular and Mehmet Birinici, of changing the text of the Risale so as to erase any reference to Kurdish tribes and Kurdistan and of contesting state authority. In other words, they claimed that the *ağabey*s had distorted the Risale in order to turn it into a Turkish nationalist, pro-state text. Also in this case, disagreements and tensions went on for several years until the group, under the leadership of Muhammed Siddik Şeyhazade, established a publishing house (*Envar Neşriyat*) with the aim of ‘bringing back the Risale to the original form’ and formed a group on its own (Şeyhazade, 2007; IndIst03; IndIst04; IndIst01; MedIst01; MedIst03; MedAnk01, MedUrf01).

Despite internal divisions, the 1970s was a period of consolidation for the movement. Towards the end of the decade, several Nur institutions were founded and a network of communication was established among groups in various towns, under the control of the *ağabey*s, although no legal society was ever formed to organise and control the movement nationally. Moreover, by the late 1970s some members obtained important positions in the public administration and their views became influential in some ministries. Exerting such influence was considered a religious service for Nur students, as was any behaviour contributing to the spread of the Risale in the country, such as wearing a tie (MeşVan01; MeşVan02). Parallel to this development, during the same period the number of civil servants who converted to the thought of Said Nursi and joined the community increased, especially in Ankara, as a result of Nur students' impact in the ministries.

During that decade, Nur students kept reading, spreading and publishing the Risale, but they also diversified their social activities. They started to celebrate the *mawlid* (commemoration of the birth) for Bediüzzaman. The *mawlid* was held three times a year in three different towns: in Isparta in September or October, in Van in July, and in Urfa on the *Laylat al-Qadr*<sup>31</sup>. These festivals, un- authorised but tolerated by the police, used to be held in the countryside, at town borders or in the mountains where Said Nursi used to go for meditation. They had the aim of connecting Nur students coming from different part of the country. Besides reading the biography of Said Nursi and the Risale people used to eat, drink tea and chat, and hence had a chance to know each other. Moreover, in different Turkish cities Nur students founded different kinds of associations, officially unrelated to the Risale, which allowed them to meet and spread the thought of Said Nursi under the guise of cultural activities<sup>32</sup>. These associations would, for example, organise conferences or meetings to commemorate Turkish poets or Sufi saints like Yunus Emre, Mevlana or Akıf Ersoy or historical events like the conquest of Istanbul or the battle of Çanakkale and use these tributes as a stepping-stone to introduce the audience to the thought of Bediüzzaman. While the *mawlid* gave Nur students the opportunity of strengthening ties within the community, the cultural associations gave them the possibility of carrying out legal activities and reaching people outside the community (Kırkınıç, 2004: 188-191; ExtIst02; YAIst05; YAIzm01; MedIst03; YNIst15; MeşIsp01).

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<sup>31</sup> The *Laylat al-Qadr* (Night of the Destiny) is the night during which the beginning of the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad is commemorated.

<sup>32</sup> For example, in Erzurum the Erzurum Foundation for Science and Culture (*Erzurum İlim ve Kültür Vakfı*), in Isparta the Isparta Foundation for Science and Culture (*Isparta İlim ve Kültür Vakfı*) and in Istanbul the Istanbul Youth Association (*İstanbul Gençlik Teşkilatı*) were founded.

Furthermore, in the '70s the movement became more scholarly and the number of well-educated Nur students increased. The necessary consequence of this change was that a specialisation process in performing the 'service to the Risale' (*hizmet*) took place. Until the 1960s *hizmet* was simply the reading and the distribution of the Risale. During the 1970s subcategories or specialised areas of *hizmet* were created: press and publications, improvement of financial facilities, centres of research in various subjects and management of political connections. Since the 1970s each of these aspects of *hizmet* has been carried out by the brothers according to their respective professions and vocations.

During the 1977 general elections the Nur students were again at the front line in the support of the JP. Before the elections, community members in Ankara made a first attempt to communicate with other religious groups, with the aim of reaching some sort of mutual understanding and common outlook concerning politics. As a result of this Nur initiative, support to the JP was given by the Nur Cemaati, by other religious communities like the *Süleymancis*<sup>33</sup> and the *Işıkçıs*<sup>34</sup>, and by some right wing newspapers not associated with any particular religious group. After the 1977 general election, representatives of these groups, which had previously supported different parties such as the NSP, the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*) and the DP, held several unofficial meetings with the government, during which they presented the requests of their respective groups and obtained from the JP positive responses and promises. Each group expressed its own particular concerns such as the appointment of their members to official posts or a benevolent attitude toward their activities. The Nur community, in consultation with Demirel, managed also to have two of its members elected in the Parliament: Osmam Demirci, candidate for Erzurum and Recep Özel, candidate for Istanbul (Şahiner, 2008: 169-170; Kutlular, 2004: 267-261; YAlzm01; IndIst03; IndIst04; ExtIst01). Nurcu's support for the JP naturally roused, once

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<sup>33</sup> The Süleymancis are a community founded during the first decades of the Republic by the Naqshabandi *shaykh* Süleyman Hilmi Tunaham (1888-1959). The movement calls for a return to the textual sources of Islam and its main goal is to train preachers to educate Muslims in accordance with the Sunni-Hanafi version of Islam. The Süleymanci have indeed established several Quranic schools across Turkey that offer traditional Islamic education with a great emphasis on memorization. Moreover, they have been very active in certain offices of the higher bureaucracy, in particular the Diyanet. In order to protect their networks from state encroachment and engage state institutions, they incorporated nationalism in their religious identity and adopted a political stance that was pro-state, against Communism and against political Islam (Yavuz, 2003: 145-149).

<sup>34</sup> The Işıkçıs are a community founded in the 1950s by an engineer and religious scholar named Hüseyin Hilmi Işık (1911-2001). The movement rejects the idea of 'reformation' of religion and calls for a return to the original essence of Islam. In the 1970s, the movement used its newspapers and magazines to publicly assume a pro-state, pro-military and anti-communist position and to express support to right wing parties rather than Islamist parties. The Işıkçıs are one of the Turkish religious communities that, thanks to this attitude, benefited from the the post-1980 Turkish military's opening towards Islam.

again, opposition from other parties – particularly the NSP and NAP, which were also bidding for the religious votes.

Finally, throughout the '70s Nur students continued their battle against communism. The Committee for the fight against Communism was shut down by the military junta in 1971, but community members continued to organise meetings and conferences in public universities and in the foundations they established to stop the circulation of socialist and communist ideas. A group of Nur students in the University of Istanbul established a 'Committee for Public Order' (*Asayiş Komitesi*), which coordinated demonstrations against communist and socialists groups' boycotts and occupations of schools, universities and factories (YAIst05; YAIzm01; IndIst01; YNIst10; YNIst13; YNIst14). Another example of 'counter-demonstration' is the Nur students' participation in and support of the 'Meeting of the Flag' (*Bayrak Mitingi*) on 1<sup>st</sup> of May 1978. The meeting was organised by the JP to obstruct and oppose the celebration of May Day in Taksim Square in Istanbul (Hürsöz, 2-05-1978; İttihad, 02-05-1978; Kırkinci, 2004: 264-267; YAIst05; YNIst13; YNIst15).

## **2.7 The Nur community after Said Nursi: 1980 to nowadays**

On 12 September 1980, the military intervened with another coup d'état to contain the diffusion of socialist ideas and political violence and to put an end to the politicisation and polarisation of society, which had been increasingly growing over the previous two decades. Once again, the Kemalist elite, in order to reach its aims – in this case to shut down leftist movements – made an instrumental use of Islam. The restructuring of civil society by military violence was topped by the military religious-cultural policies of 'Sunnite Islam as the cement of society'. The Turkish Islamic Synthesis (*Türk İslam Sentezi*) – the official new ideology put forward by the military regime – aimed at blending Sunni Islamic values with nationalist values and to include in the mechanisms of power a non-politicised form of Islam. The military authorities intended to sponsor an illuminated version of Islam, open to social change and to secularism. On the one hand, they used the old argument according to which secularism is necessary for the full development of Islam but, on the other hand, they underlined that religion was necessary for social cohesion and stated for the first time that Islam and Kemalism were compatible. Religious groups benefited from the political restructuring and the new social conditions created by the military establishment. As Murat Akan argues, the 1980 military government has enabled Sunnite religious actors vis-à-vis

other actors to get organised in civil society, by dismantling the syndicates and the leftist organisations and by promoting social policies in favour of Islam (Akan, 2011: 5). These enabled groups later built elite links with the transitory Özal government (1983-1989).

The coup engendered a split within the Nur community that sealed the tensions existing between the group gathered around the *Yeni Asya* newspaper and the rest of the movement, as the first, together with *Medreset-ü Zehra*, opposed the military regime, while the latter, together with the Scribes and the Fetullah Gülen group, backed it. After September 12, Mehmet Kırkinci, who was among the vanguard for the support of the military, declared that Demirel's Justice Party had failed in its mission. As he writes in his memoirs, he felt that, since the JP was not able to put an end to political violence and free the country from the perils of communism, only an intervention of the military could have saved the nation (Kırkinci, 2004: 236). In order to convince the community of the necessity of the coup, he, together with Osman Demirci, made a tour of Turkey to talk to people and explain that this coup was very different from the 1960 military intervention and that it was something that would bring peace to the country. In the speeches he gave during his tour around Turkey he used the following metaphor: 'In the 1960 coup we were victim of a flood. This flood left our gardens under water and brought giant rocks to our houses. Since then, we have been trying to move these rocks, but our strength was not enough. Now, the new coup has taken the rocks away and has given back to us our houses and our gardens' (Kırkinci, 2004: 245; YAIzm01; MedUrf01).

In 1982, a referendum was held in Turkey to approve the Constitution drawn up by the military junta. During a consultation meeting in Isparta that part of the community that sided with the military decided that Nur students would vote yes to the Constitution (Kırkinci, 2004: 245-247). Before the referendum, while the new Constitution was being written down, Mehmet Kırkinci, together with Şener Dilek and Alaaddin Başar, prepared a constitution draft titled 'What kind of Constitution' (*Nasıl bir Anayasa*) and sent it to some of the military. He then moved for a while to Ankara, together with Osman Demirci and Mustafa Sungur, to lobby for a Constitution that would not obstruct Islamic activities, that would recognise Islam as an important foundation for society and that would render lessons in religion in public schools compulsory. They managed to meet with some ex members of the Parliament, some military and the head of the Diyanet, Tayyar Altıkulaç and to give them the Constitution draft (Kırkinci, 2004: 273-278).

The Yeni Asya group, instead, under the leadership of Mehmet Fırıncı, Mehmet Kutlular and Mehmet Birinci, opposed the military coup, considering it as an attempt to impose, once more, Kemalism on the country, hidden behind the anti-communist rhetoric (Kutlular, 2009: 272-307; YNIst17; YAIst02; YAIst05; YAIzm01; IndIst05). With the 1982 referendum approaching, the group had a consultation in Yeni Bosna (a neighbourhood of Istanbul) during which it was decided that they would vote against the new Constitution. A few days before the referendum, the group's monthly magazine *Köprü* (The Bridge) came out with a supplement entitled 'Where are we with regard to democracy?' (*Demokrasinin neresindeyiz?*). The brochure invited the readers to vote no, because a constitution written by a military junta was against Said Nursi's defence of fundamental rights and freedoms (Köprü, October 1982). After the brochure was published, both the Yeni Asya newspaper and the Köprü magazine were closed down with a court decision. The constitution was approved with 92% of the votes. The Yeni Asya group re-opened the newspaper under the new name of Yeni Nesil (*New Generation*). At the first democratic election after the coup they voted for the Right Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*), born out of the ashes of the JP. The rest of the community, instead, voted for the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Parsisi*), sponsored by the military and led by Turgut Özal.

The part of the community that sided with the MP took advantage of the new socio-political conditions inaugurated by the Özal administration. Indeed, the Özal era brought about changes in the composition of the governing class. For the most part the new elite was made up of businessmen and technocrats who came from the periphery's middle classes and who reached political power after benefiting from the new opportunities offered by public education and obtaining significant economic successes. Co-optation of these elements of society first in the party and then in the government was due, in part, to the ban from politics of previous years' politicians, imposed by the military junta, and, in part, to the Özal's positive attitude towards entrepreneurs (Arat, 1991:168). The new elite brought elements of popular and religious culture into the centre of power. For the first time the government's exponents publicly respected religious duties, like ritual prayer, Ramadan fasting and pilgrimage to Mecca. Moreover, with the aim of officially legitimising the new conception of Islam's role in Turkish society, Özal used religious communities, Sufi orders, family ties and mosques to build a dynamic relationship with society, adapting these traditional networks to the modern urban context (Yavuz, 2003:75).

In 1990 a new split occurred within the Yeni Asya group. The divisions originated by disagreement about the content and the style of the Yeni Nesil newspaper's articles. The circle around Mehmet Fırıncı pushed for a more conciliatory stance towards governments and a less stringent critique of Kemalism. The group gathered around Mehmet Kutlular, instead, was in favour of being vociferous against Kemalism and considered it necessary to keep an oppositional standpoint towards governments that did not stem from the Democratic Party tradition. After the split, the Fırıncı group, from that point on named *Yeni Nesil* maintained the ownership of the Yeni Nesil newspaper, while the Kutlular group, which kept the Yeni Asya name, re-founded the Yeni Asya newspaper.

During the '90s, the Yeni Nesil group and the group gathered around Mehmet Kırkıncı and Mutafa Sungur, which started to call itself *Meşveret* (consultation) got closer to Erbakan's Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*). The Yeni Asya group, instead, stayed on the side of the Right Path Party. The movement, in general, continued its practice of reading and spreading the Risale at grassroots level and maintained its strategy of consultation with politicians and parliament representatives at elite level. Erbakan's Welfare Party at the beginning of the decade managed to gain increasing consensus and won the local elections in 1994 and the general election in 1995 (although he did not deliver an overall majority). In 1997 the military, alarmed by the references to shari'a made by the prime minister, intervened again in Turkish politics with a 'memorandum' which prompted the resignation of Erbakan and the end of his coalition government. During these events that went down in history as the 'Post-modern Coup', the Meşveret group kept a low profile, despite disapproving the military intervention, whereas the Yeni Asya and Yeni Nesil openly condemned it (Yeni Asya, February-March 1997; YNIst17; YAIst05; YAIzm01).

In 2011 the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) was founded by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as a result of a split from the National Outlook Movement. In 2002, a year after its foundation, the party obtained the majority of votes at the general elections and has been in power ever since, winning three consecutive electoral competitions. The JDP era, with its mix of religious conservatism and neo-liberal capitalism, represented for the community (or at least for the subgroups within the community that support the party) a turning point. The party, following the tradition started by its right-wing, conservative predecessors established strong ties with religious communities, offering to them protection and proselytising opportunities in exchange for votes and public support (see Chapter 5).



Today, Yeni Asya votes for the successors of the Right Path Party, the Democratic Party led by Gültekin Uysal, claiming that it represents the democratic tradition started with Menderes that Said Nursi supported. The Med-Zehra and the Zehra groups, the current Kurdish sections of the community, do not have any specific political affiliation, hanging in the balance between religious and Kurdish nationalistic claims. The rest of the community – that is, the Scribes, the Yeni Nesil and the Meşveret groups – stand with the JDP, claiming that the democratic tradition inaugurated by Menderes is now represented by Erdoğan's party. It is this section of the community that benefited the most from the JDP's stance towards the religious community, establishing the party with profitable alliances (see Chapter 5).

## **2.8 Conclusions**

In this chapter I first presented a brief account of Said Nursi's biography, paying particular attention to the events that contributed to shape Nur students' socio-political views. Nursi's life is for his followers a model of action in both the everyday realm and in the public sphere. Often the political choices made by community's subgroups are justified on the basis of Bediüzzaman's reaction to and interpretation of historical and political changes. Nursi oscillated between political activism (Old Said), withdrawal from public life (New Said) and cautious engagement with government representatives (Third Said). In every phase, however, he displayed respect for state institutions and for democratic procedures. Moreover, in the years between the foundation of the Republic and his death, prudence, patience and rejection of violence informed his political attitude. All of these elements are reflected in Nur students' political behaviour (see also Chapter 5).

The chapter also showed that the history of the Nur community is a story of progressive gain of recognition and power. The initial phase of persecution and exclusion from the political realm that the movement went through makes a sharp contrast with the current situation, since today it is one of the most influential actors in the Turkish public sphere and a powerful ally of the governing party. This dramatic change was possible thanks to external and internal dynamics. At the external level the factors that impacted the nature of the community's relationship with the State were the following: the progressive re-introduction of Islamic values in public discourses by the Democrat Party, Justice Party and Motherlands Party governments; their policies of support of Islamic education; the instrumental use of Islam as a weapon against the spread of communist and socialist ideas during the three military coups of

1960, 1971 and 1980; and the coming to power of a party, the JDP, which offered to the community considerable opportunities of cooperation with state institutions (see Chapter 5).

At the internal level instead, the element that helped the community in reaching its current status in Turkish society was its winning political strategy made up of three phases: first, peacefully (that is, without rebellion) accepting discrimination and exclusion during the years when the Kemalist secularisation project was in its heyday; then, carefully approaching politicians with the aim of consultation when the measures against religious associations relaxed; and, finally, skilfully navigating the new chances offered by the JDP. Throughout the decades Nur students never called into question the Republican institutions and never attempted, nor even theorised about, subverting the established order. While these themes will be explored in more detail in the following chapters, for now it is important to underline that, contrary to other sections of the Turkish Islamist movement, the Nur community did not go through a process of radicalisation (under the influence of the National Outlook Movement) and subsequent de-radicalisation (under the influence of the JDP) (Tuğal, 2009); its pro-state, anti-revolutionary attitude always stood at the very core of its stance towards political power.

Finally, the chapter provided an historical background to the analysis of the interplay between Nur students' imaginary and their collective social and political actions (see Chapter 5). In other words, it addressed from an historical point of view the question of how Nur students' discourses are turned into practice. To be clear, if compared with the wider practice of *hizmet* (see Chapter 3), interactions with political parties and institutions represent a small part of Nur students' engagement with society. Nevertheless, they are a significant aspect of the community's encounter with its social and political surroundings and needs to be evaluated if the functioning of Islamic imaginaries is to be understood. In keeping with Taylor's intuition that in the construction of social imagination theory and practice are mutually sustained, the chapter showed how the community's discourse was partly influenced by the context in which it was constructed. Thus, the incorporation in the community's narrative of Turkish nationalism and of a pro-military attitude, while being in line with Nursi's utmost respect for state institutions, also derived from Nur students' wish to protect their networks from state encroachment. Similarly, their opposition to Islamist parties was solidly grounded in Nursi's political theology (see Chapter 4), but was at the same time motivated by the need to maintain cordial ties with mainstream right wing parties, which could function as intermediaries between the community and the judiciary in cases of Nur students' detention or suspension of their activities.

## Chapter 3

### A Map of the Nur Community: Text and Structure

#### 3.1 Mobilisation among the Nur community between salvation and recognition

In the summer of 2011 I made a two-day trip to the Istanbul district of Sariyer with some women belonging to the Yeni Nesil group. We were there in order to visit the house that Said Nursi used to live in during his time in the city, and the trip became an occasion for the ladies that took part in the tour to share their memories about their first encounter with the *cemaat* and their first readings of the Risale-i Nur. One woman in her early sixties, who had been reading the Risale for more than thirty years, gave me the following account:

I used to be a teacher in middle school in Muğla [in the Aegean region of Turkey], my home town, and I loved my job. During the first years of my teaching experience I still did not use to cover my hair (*hala açıktım*). I had not received any religious education. I had just memorised the prayers in Arabic, but did not even know what they meant. I also knew that my mother used to cover her head, but she did it out of tradition, not out of a real understanding of faith. Indeed, she used to wear the veil that leaves the hair on the forehead visible (*başörtüsü*). I felt I did not know anything about the religion I was born in, so I decided to enrol myself on a Quran course. There I learnt that showing even a single hair of a woman was a great sin, punishable with hell. I was shocked. After a while I decide to put the veil on. The problem was that I did not know how to do that. I was conscious that the way my mother used to cover her head did not conform to the dictates of the Quran, but I did not know how to do it in any other way. I explained this to the teacher (*hoca*) of the Quran course and he told me that there was a woman from Ankara in town, who knew what the proper way of wearing a veil was. I met with her. We bought together a piece of fabric big enough to cover the entire head [forehead included] and tailored a *hijab* out of it – at that time you could not buy *hijabs* in the shops as you can do today. Then she showed me how to tie it around the head with pins. So I started to wear a veil (*kapandım*). That day my struggle (*mücadele*) began. I had to leave my job at the school. A couple of months after, the teacher of the Quran course introduced me to the Risale-i Nur. I have been reading it ever since. I see this [reading the Risale] as part of my struggle and it also compensates for the fact that I could not be a teacher anymore.

The struggle this woman is talking about is a struggle for salvation, which only incidentally becomes a struggle for recognition. Followers of Said Nursi think of him as a re-newer of Islam (*müceheddit*), one of those Muslim guides who appear on the earth every 100 years to revive the message of Islam in line with changing social, cultural and historical conditions. They repeatedly state that the aim of the Risale is to ‘save the faith’ (*imamı kurtarmak*) in an era when the foundations of Islam are under threat. As is evident from the account quoted above, the motivations that inform members’ involvement in the Nur Community are based

on the wish to practice Islam correctly, to establish the proper relation with Allah and ultimately to gain his approval (*Allah'ın rızası kazanmak*). Thus, mobilisation for the reading of the Risale aims at the re-training of ethical sensibilities – at both individual and societal level – and needs to be understood within this framework.

The activities of the Nur Community, nevertheless, go beyond the pure reading of the Risale and overflow into the fields of education, media and, less often, politics. After a *sohbet* meeting, one of the public figures of the community, quoting a passage from the Risale<sup>35</sup> which establishes for Nur students the priorities of their actions, explained this double range of activities to me in the following way: ‘The Risale-i Nur looks exclusively at the hereafter (*sırf ahiret’e bakar*), its objective is to save the faith. The aim of the students of the Risale is instead to save themselves and others. In order to do this, they strive to establish the bond of religion (*dinin bağı kurmak*) [among people] and by doing so they try to save people from anarchy. In its attempt to erase anarchy from the world and to make the laws respected, the community opens schools, dormitories and cultural centres; offers scholarships to needy students; publishes books and magazines; broadcasts radio programmes; organises international conferences to make Said Nursi known around the world, and engages in the public debate about law in Turkey’. He concluded by saying that the involvement of the community in the society is inevitable given the nature of Islam, which is not only about faith and ethics, like Christianity is, but regulates every aspects of the world, ‘from the individual to the state’<sup>36</sup>.

The decisions concerning the engagement with media and education are made at the leadership levels and are complemented, as seen in the previous chapter, by micro political actions, again reflected upon by prominent members of the community. Clear involvement in the society and subtle involvement in politics aim at recognition of Islamic claims, in the sense that they aspire at making Islamic demands heard and accommodated within the public sphere, and at the Islamization of the society – that is, the dissemination of Islamic values and precepts among the population.

This chapter aims at delineating the structure of the community in order to clarify how this double-layered mobilisation is carried out. It shows that the organisation of the community was influenced by two sets of factors. On the one hand, it is the result of Said Nursi’s project

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<sup>35</sup> The passage is from the Emirdağ Lahikası, quoted also, to argue the same thing, in Mürsel, 2005: 21.

<sup>36</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet* in Istanbul, March 2012.

of Islamic reformation, a venture that was internal to the Islamic tradition and independent from state pressures. On the other hand, it is the outcome of a process of adaptation to state persecution and political instability. The chapter starts with a discussion of the focal point of the movement, the *Risale*, so as to shed light on the nature of the text and style of reading. The investigation of the text is followed by a discussion on the elements of continuity and ruptures between the Nur movement and Sufism and the new form of spirituality brought about by Nursi's peculiar methodology in the search for Divine truth. Then, the structure of the community and the organisation of the *hizmet* is analysed. Finally, the modalities of decision making within the community are examined.

### **3.2 The legacy of Said Nursi: the *Risale-i Nur***

While the *Risale-i Nur* was intended as a commentary of the Quran, it presents three characteristics that differentiate it from classical works of exegesis. First, according to Nur students, it does not fit into any of the traditional categories of *tafsir* (Quranic exegesis): *tafsir bi-l-riwayia* (by transmission), by which is meant an interpretation of the Quran based on explanations that can be traced back, through a chain of transmission, to a legitimate source; *tafsir bi-l-ray* (by sound opinion), which is a reading of the Holy Book founded on the use of reason, *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *qiyās* (deductive analogy); and *tafsir bi-l-ishara* (by signs), often used by Sufi-inspired authors, by which is meant the understanding of the Quran beyond its outward and more immediate significance, through meanings which are not accessible to everybody, but only to those who were opened by Allah to Divine knowledge. While Nur students avoid defining the *Risale* as any of these three kinds of *tafsir*, they claim that the text was the result of 'divine inspiration' (*ilham*) and that it does not have any other source than the Quran itself. Second, in the *Risale* the verses of the Quran are not interpreted one by one according to the order in which they appear. The text is, instead, a thematically organised presentation of the topics addressed throughout the Quran. Third, the corpus of the *Risale-i Nur* includes not only interpretations of certain verses of the Quran, but also extracts from Said Nursi's life, newspaper articles or speeches written by the scholar in the era of First Said, defence speeches he made during the numerous trials he was involved in, accounts of Nur students' activities, the correspondence between them and their master, and descriptions of the movement's relation with state institutions. Of the fourteen books composing the *Risale*, only the first one, *Sözler* (The Words), contains exclusively exegetical materials. All

the other books either present a mix of Quranic interpretations and historical and biographical material or cover exclusively the latter.

This is perhaps the characteristic than more than any other attests to the peculiar nature of the Risale. The biographical and historical elements of the Risale serve the functions of strengthening the collective memory and the collective identity of the group, and of providing a comparison between the readers' everyday experience and Said Nursi's life. Readers of the Risale, despite the generational gap between themselves and Nursi, may find in the text descriptions of stories and situations that they might have experienced or that they can relate to. This feature contributes to make the Risale pertinent for today's reader, as it stimulates reflections on the life that Said Nursi lived, from the challenges he faced to the interactions he had with people of different faiths (Mürsel, 2005: 110-113).

However, the presence in the Risale of non-exegetical material has two further implications. First, the fact that the writings that Nur students read and disseminate cover stories and letters to the Nur students themselves implies that to acquire and protect the faith as a Muslim, one not only has to study the Quranic interpretation of Said Nursi, but also to read about his life and about the movement's struggle with the state. In other words, getting to know Nursi as a person and learning about the first years of the movement are necessary steps in the process of ethical training and perfection of the faith that Nur students go through when they read the Risale.

The second implication is connected to the fact that reading the Risale is also seen as performing a very important and powerful act of worship or religious service (*ibadah*). As a student explained during a lesson, reading corresponds to performing five types of *ibadah*: practicing *jihad* with science (*ilimle cihat etmek*), helping the Master, that is, Said Nursi (*Ustadina yardım etmek*); helping Muslims in the *jihad* of faith (*müslümanlara iman cihatinde yardım etmek*); studying science (*kalemle ilim tahsil etmek*); practicing meditation (*tefekkiir ibadetini yapmak*). Reading the Risale is thus considered a duty to be performed not only for the personal spiritual growth of the reader, but also for strengthening the faith of the Muslim community at supranational level. In this light, serving the Risale equates serving the Quran<sup>37</sup>. However, as Gencel Sezgin underlines, the fact that the Risale abundantly contains the activities of the movement members, referring to Risale-related practices as *ibadah* and

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<sup>37</sup> A yeni Nesil lesson in Sariyer, Istanbul in June 2011.

equating them to reading the Quran blurred the boundaries between the sacred and the profane (Gencel Sezgin, 2011: 100-101).

Finally, a few words need to be added about what it is considered to be the miraculous nature of the Risale. In the view of Nur students, if the inspiration that Said Nursi received from God is already a sign in itself of the miraculous nature of the Risale, the extraordinary power of the text is evident also in the reaction it provokes in the reader. For members of the community the Risale, despite its intangible language, ‘speaks to everybody’, that is, it can be understood by everybody, ‘from the children to the *ulama*’, with the only difference that people understand it in more or less depth, according to their education and previous knowledge. From this characteristic of the Risale derives, again, the importance of reading the text over and over again and progressing, through reading, in the understanding of it. As a consequence, within the cemaat, the reputation and authority of a member does not depend on his socio-economic status, but on the degree and depth of his knowledge of the Risale.

One of my interviewees, while praising the beauty and extraordinary power of the Risale, recalled the following story in order to point out the subversion of social hierarchies operated by the text and its miraculousness: ‘It was 1966 or maybe 1967. One night a university professor came for the first time to our lesson in Eminöü [a neighbourhood of Istanbul]. Fırıncı Abi led the sohbet that night. The university professor listened with interest, but did not say a word. Once the lesson was over, we [the interviewee and Fırıncı Abi] went back to the dersbane and went to sleep. The next day, right after the morning prayer, somebody knocked at our door. It was the university professor. Without coming in, he said to Fırıncı Abi: “Yesterday you did not explain what is so miraculous about this Risale”. Fırıncı Abi replied: “Look, you are a university professor from Istanbul and I am an uneducated baker from the countryside. And yet, yesterday you sat down and listened to my lesson and today, so early in the morning, you knocked at my door to ask me a question. Don’t you find this miraculous?”’ (YNIst15).

At the same time, according to Nur students, reading the Risale gives the reader a sense of peace, even when he does not completely understand what he is reading. Members of the community that grew up in households where the Risale was read on a daily basis, fondly recall listening to the elders reading the text during their childhood. They remember that they were not able to understand what the elders were talking about, but they still used to feel harmony and happiness descending upon their hearts. The same feeling is described in an

interview by Mary Weld, a British citizen who converted to Islam thanks to the Risale and became a public figure of the community: ‘When I started to read the Risale-i Nur in the English translation, I could not understand them. [...] Despite this, there was something in me that responded to them. My mind could not grasp what they were saying, but some deeper part of me seemed to take nourishment from them; it drove me to sit down by myself and read them again and again’ (Weld, 2005: 13).

### **3.3 The Nur movement’s relationship with Sufism: substitution or evolution?**

In his book ‘The Sufi Orders in Islam’, Trimingham attributes what he considers to be the decline of the *tariqas* (Sufi brotherhoods) across the Muslim world to two main factors: the active opposition to them carried out by *ulama*, *salafi* reformers and secular elites, and the fact that, with the foundation of new educational and recreational institutions, many functions of the *tariqa* were taken over by either the secularist or the orthodox Sunni organisations. In the author’s view, in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*), thanks to its web of local associations, served as a substitute for the Sufi orders, both in terms of the religious and ethical training of the individual, and in terms of social and economic services offered to the community. He underlines also that in different countries the Muslim Brotherhood has appealed to different classes of the population, but in general the *Ikhwan* have been opposed to the Sufi orders and have contributed towards their decline (Trimingham, 1971: 251). In a similar vein, Mermer defines the Nur community as a ‘religious movement that emerged amidst a particular social and political condition of the Republic as a substitute for the religious order which had had a long lasting effect on the Turkish nation’ (Mermer, 1985: 12). The present work considers the Nur community as an evolution of, more than a substitute for, Sufi *tariqas*, as Said Nursi never assumed an antagonist stance toward Sufi orders and his interpretation of the Quran is clearly influenced by Sufism.

Moreover, the Nur community, despite not being a *tariqa*, represents a case of contemporary significance of Sufism that goes beyond the models typically employed to describe this phenomenon. Studies on Sufi brotherhoods usually make use of four distinct paradigms. The most widespread of these is Max Weber’s routinization of charisma. The most famous example of the use of this model is Michael Gilsenan’s (1973) study of the *Khalwatiyya* Sufi order in Egypt, in which the author attributes the continuing significance of the order to a



form of Weberian rationality, namely the adoption of a formal structure and explicit written rules. A second paradigm that can be applied to Sufi orders is that of denominalization (Lucas and Robbins, 2004). This model was developed to explain changes over the long period. It describes a kind of entropy, the tendency for religious groups and the energies associated with them to degrade to an ultimate stage of uniformity with their socio-cultural environment. A third paradigm is that of cyclical process. This model, utilized for example by Mark Sedgwick (2005) for the study of the *Ahmadi* order in Egypt, encompasses three stages, whereby an order first rises under a great scholar, then splits as it spreads and then stabilizes. There are then two main possibilities for each branch emerging from the split. Sometimes, stabilization turns into decline, through some forms of denominalization and usually under a son of the original great *shaykh*. Sometimes, however, a new great scholar or saint emerges to revive the order, and the cycle begins again. Finally, a number of scholars resorted to the concept of ‘neo-Sufism’ to point out a number of important changes in the nature of Sufism that occurred between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. According to these scholars, ‘neo-Sufism’ is characterized by increased militancy (particularly in the context of anti-colonial struggles), stronger orientation towards the shari’a, rejection of *bid’a* (innovations) and a de-emphasis on or rejection of practices aimed at achieving an ecstatic union with God, in favor of imitation of the Prophet in daily life (O’Fahey and Radtke, 1993; De Jong and Radtke, 1999).

While being beyond the purpose of this study to discuss the adaptation of Sufism to modernity, in this section I intend to point out that the survival of Sufism that is, the influence that this stream of Islamic doctrines and practices continues to exercise in contemporary Muslim societies, can be seen not only in the restructuring of Sufi *tariqas* in the modern nation-state, but also in the impact that Sufi thought had on the formation of new religious communities that do not categorize themselves directly as *tariqas*. In the case of the Nur community the influence of Sufism is particularly evident in Nursi’s theory of the ‘book of the universe’ (*dünya’nın kitabı*), derived from the idea – crucial in Sufi thought – that knowledge of God can be attained through the observation of His ‘signs’ in the universe, and in the feeling of brotherhood (*uhuvvet*) established among adherents to the community – which is built upon Sufism-inspired relational practices. In this section, I recall Nursi’s own account of his encounter with Sufism and of the reasons why he felt the need to develop in the Risale a new way of reaching Divine truth. I will then move on in the following sections to

underline the significance of the theory of the ‘book of the universe’ and to highlight the role that Sufi patterns of connectivity had in the organization of the community as a *cemaat*.

On the one hand, Said Nursi thought that, given the socio-cultural context of his society, the way of the Sufis was difficult to follow and, as a method of reaching the truths, slow to produce results. He concluded that the twentieth century was ‘not the time of *tariqa*, but the time of *cemaat* (*bu zaman tarikat zamani degil, cemaat zamanidir*)’ (The Letters: 40). On the other hand, the influence of Sufism on Nursi during his early career cannot be overstated. During his formative years he was considerably inspired by Jilani, al-Ghazali and Sirhindi and he often described them as his ‘spiritual poles’. This influence is revealed in Nursi’s subsequent writings: the worldview of Sufism imbues his work, informs the metaphors that pepper his writing and finds expression in his approach to personal acts of devotions.

While Nursi was searching for answers to man’s existential dilemma, Sufism was one of the possible solutions he examined. The scholar admitted this in the presence of a student, Mustafa Sungur: ‘Sixty years ago, I was searching for a way to reach reality that was appropriate for the present age [...] First I had recourse to the way of the philosophers; I wanted to reach the truth with just the reason. But I reached it only twice with extreme difficulty [...] Then I had recourse to the way of Sufism and studied it. I saw that it was truly luminous and effulgent, but it needed the greatest caution. Only the highest of the elite could take that way. So, seeing that this cannot be the way for everyone at this time, either, I sought help from the Quran. And thanks be to God, the Risale-I Nur was bestowed on me, which is a safe, short way inspired by the Quran for the believers of the present time’ (Vahide, 2005: 167). This passage illustrates Nursi’s attempt to find a synthesis between what he called the rational speculation of the philosophers and the mysticism of the Sufis. As it will become clearer in the following pages, this synthesis is realized in the new form of spirituality based on reflective thought and meditation that he developed.

In his writings Nursi often emphasises the identicalness of the essences and goals of Sufism and the Risale: both spread out from the Quran and aim at expanding the truths of belief. What differentiates them is their focus: Sufism aspires at perfecting the nuances of belief when faith is already strong and solid; the Risale, instead, intends to explain and make understandable the basic tenets of belief in order to strengthen a faith that is weak and uncertain. To express this difference Nursi writes: ‘Since the reality of the matter is thus, my conjecture is that, if persons like Shaykh ‘Abd al Qadir Jilani (may God be pleased with him)

and Shah Naqshband (may God be pleased with him) and Imam-i Rabbani (may God be pleased with him) were alive at the present time, they would expend all their efforts in strengthening the truths of belief and tenets of Islam. These are the means to eternal happiness. If there is deficiency in them, it results in eternal misery. A person without belief may not enter Paradise, but very many have gone to Paradise without Sufism. Man cannot live without bread, but he can live without fruit. Sufism is the fruit; the truths of Islam, basic sustenance' (The Letters: 41).

In a similar vein, Said Nursi is reported to have said: 'If Mevlana had lived in the twentieth century he would have written the Risale-i Nur and not the famous work the *Mesnevi*, and if Said Nursi had lived at the time of Mevlana, he would have written the *Mesnevi* and not the Risale-i Nur'<sup>38</sup>. This sentence became very famous among members of the community and they elucidate its meaning by explaining that in the old days, most people believed in God, and thus their only need was to perfect their belief through the kind of spiritual purification advocated by classical Sufism. With the advent of modernity, however, and the rise of materialism and atheism, many people have either lost their beliefs or are in search of faith, and the only method appropriate in the modern times to recover from this situation is the one of the Risale-i Nur<sup>39</sup>. In a nutshell, Nur students, following the dictum of Nursi, recognise the Sufi path as a legitimate way of reaching the truth; they simply think that the methodology of the Risale is more effective in answering the needs of men in contemporary society.

### **3.4 The book of the universe and the new spirituality**

According to Nur students, one of the differences between the Sufi way and the Risale's approach is that the Sufi path turns toward the inside and aims at finding God within the self, while the Risale-i Nur's method requires that people are open towards the outside and aims at finding God in the universe. This is due, they argue, to the fact that Sufism gave greater importance to *zhikr* (the practice of reciting the names of Allah in endless repetition) at the expenses of *fikr* (the practice of constantly thinking of God), while Nursi reversed the equation<sup>40</sup>. The Risale-i Nur, indeed, lays great emphasis on contemplation of the cosmos and

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<sup>38</sup> I heard this quotation attributed to Nursi numerous times during the fieldwork.

<sup>39</sup> Informal conversations with Yeni Nesil group members, Istanbul February-May 2012.

<sup>40</sup> This explanation was provided by several Nur students during the first part of my fieldwork (February-July 2012) when I asked questions about the way in which the Nur movement departed from Sufism.

the ‘signs of God’ showcased therein – something that Nursi borrowed from Sufism to make it the central doctrine of his religious teaching<sup>41</sup>.

In the Risale, worship is not only understood in its formal aspect of prescribed prayers, fasting or giving charity. Intense contemplation and reflection on God’s creation (*tefekkiir*) and the pursuit of knowledge of God and His names are also considered forms of worship. The latter are seen as important steps leading the believer toward the attainment of a state of perennial observation and experience of the Divine presence. In his search for a new method to attain knowledge of God, Nursi applied the meditative exercises derived from Sufism to both the daily Islamic practices and the observation of nature. In this way he found a middle ground between abstract speculation on the nature of God and sterile adherence to religious duties.

A good illustration of this mindset with regard to devotional practices is Nursi’s description of the five daily prayers. For him, this is not only a matter of obedience to the command of God, although, of course, it is at last that. It is more. The pattern of daily prayer is an opportunity to live the rich experience of life during the course of one day and to revive hour by hour the miracle of the creation and remember the bounties provided by God. Nursi explains:

“The time of *Fajr*, the early morning: this time until sunrise resembles and calls to mind the early spring, the moment of conception in the mother’s womb and the first six days of the creation of the heavens and the earth; it recalls the Divine acts present in them.

The time of *Zuhr*, just past midday: this resembles and points to mid-summer and the prime of youth, and the period of man’s creation in the life-time of the world, and calls to mind the manifestations of mercy and the abundant bounties in them.

The time of *Asr*, afternoon: this is like autumn, an old age, and the time of the Final Prophet (PBUH), [...] and recalls of the Divine acts and favors of the All-Merciful One in them.

The time of *Maghrib*, sunset: through recalling the departure of many creations at the end of autumn and man’s death, and the destruction of the world at the commencement of the Resurrection, this time puts in mind the manifestations of Divine Glory and Sublimity [...].

The time of *Isha*, nightfall: [...] by calling the mind to the world of darkness [...] it proclaims the awesome and mighty disposal of the All-Glorious and Compelling Subduer (The Words: 53).”

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<sup>41</sup> Here it is important to notice two things. First, in the Quran both *zikr* and *fikr* are presented as legitimate ways to meditate about God and ‘His signs’ and they are both practiced by members of Sufi orders. However, the latter have historically accorded precedence to *zikhr* due to a suspicion towards an excessive trust in the ability of the human intellect to reach Divine truths that *fikr* appeared to entail (Gardet, 2011; Vicini, 2013: 107-108). Second, the Risale’s emphasis on *fikr* does not mean complete abandonment of *zhikr*. Nur students recite a peculiarly arranged *tasbih* (Muslim rosary) taught to them by Said Nursi and consider it as a form of *zhikr*.

As Markham and Birinici Pirim argue, in this description of prayers Nursi underlines that one of the primary purposes of living before God is to live life with reflection and intention. Reflection is important because the pauses in a day are what give the passing of time significance. Thus, the reflective moments built into this structure of prayers ensures that the pattern of living is placed within the context of the creation (Markham and Birinici Pirim, 2011: 39).

An integral part of this approach to belief is the doctrine of the ‘book of the universe’ (*dünya’nın kitabı*). Nursi depicts the universe as a book, that is, as something to be read, and lays considerable emphasis on the complementary relationship between the Quran, which he defines as ‘the book of the attribute of Speech’ and the universe, which he defines as ‘the book of Will and Power’. According to the scholar, Quranic truths may be truly expounded only in the light of the knowledge of the physical world brought to light by scientific progress. There is, indeed, an interdependent connection between the Quran and the universe, a connection that Nur students illustrate with the sentence ‘The Quran reads the universe and the universe reads the Quran’ (*Kuran kainatı okuyor, kainat Kuran’ı okuyor*). The universe is dependent on the Quran for its meanings to be understood; it only gains significance through the Quran. With its verses about natural phenomena, the Quran is the interpreter and translator of the book of the universe. Conversely, the universe becomes ‘an embodied Quran’: it expresses the same truths as the Quran. However, whereas the Quran proceeds for Allah’s attribute of Speech, the universe finds existence through the manifestation of His Power (Said Nursi, *The Rays*: 228; 257; 577; 600).

The chief function of the book of the universe is to teach those who read it about its Writer and His attributes. In everything in the universe there is indeed a sign indicating that Allah is One. Thus, just as the purpose of the universe being in this form is that it should be read, so man’s fundamental duty is to see in every existing being the miracles of God’s dominical power and to reflect on them as objects from which lessons may be drawn. The theory of the book of the universe and the consequent need that men observe the world to find in it signs of God is extended to the human body. Being a microcosm and a miniature map of the universe, the latter is part of the book of the universe, and deserves as much attention and contemplation as nature does.

The model developed by Nursi for reflective thought (*tefekkiir*) also suggests that the book of universe must be read at two different levels of meaning: *mana-i ismi*, the meaning of things

which refers to themselves, or ‘self-referential’ meanings and *mana-i harfî*, the indicative meaning to which things refer, or ‘other indicative’ meanings (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 67). In this regards, Nursi explains: ‘According to the apparent meaning of things, which look to each thing as itself, everything is transitory, lacking, accidental, and non-existent. But according to the meaning that signifies other than itself, and in respect of each thing being a mirror to the All Glorious Maker’s Names and charged with various duties, each is a witness, it is witnessed and is existent’ (The Words: 340).

In another writing on the same topic, Nursi argues: ‘All things other than God, that is, the universe, should be looked at as signifying something other than themselves (*mana-i harfî*) and on His account. It is an error to look at them as signifying only themselves (*mana-i ismî*) and on account of causes. Yes, everything had two faces. One looks at the Creator, the other at creation. Like a lace veil or transparent glass, the face looking at creation should direct the gaze to the face looking at the Creator beneath it. Thus, when considering bounties, the Bestower of the bounties should spring to mind [...] when looking at causes, one should think of the True Causer of Causes’ (Said Nursi, Mesnevi –i Nuriye: 46). Nursi’s view of the universe provides a way to find God by looking at nature and seeing in it signs of His Power and Dominicality<sup>42</sup>. This model, in turn, as stated above, brings about a new form of spirituality that is based on constant contemplation and reflection, to be practiced by the believer in every single moment of his or her life.

The following passage from the official website of the Nur Spirituality Institute illustrates well how the kind of spirituality advocated in the Risale-i Nur is intended and practiced nowadays: ‘Accessing the divine presence is easy and it is available to everyone. Yet, we are often not aware of this life-transforming reality. Our prayer is to share reflections on the art of living in the divine presence, specifically: practical ways to feel the divine presence; riding with the Quran to the heavens and within; discovering the beauty of being human; tuning to listen to the beautiful symphony of creation; deepening knowledge and the love of the divine; reflections on *islam* (surrendering to God) as a way of life (the lowercase *i* is to emphasise the active surrendering to God, not an identity) [...]; self-help, self-improvement and personal

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<sup>42</sup> This paradigm is also conducive to a reconciliation of religion and science, which Nursi strongly endorses. Studying sciences is indeed considered as a way to learn about the perfection of the Creation and, as a consequence, about the Power and Wisdom of the Creator. A significant exception to this approval of modern science is represented by the evolutionary theory, rejected in favour of creationism because it is considered a conspiracy aimed at undermining the sacred truths of the Quran.

productivity tips based on the art of living in the divine presence'<sup>43</sup>. The quotes, while still making references to Sufi-inspired spiritual exercises, makes clear the evolution of the practice of experiencing the divine presence from a Sufi path defined by clear cut and progressive steps reached thanks to the strict supervision of a Sufi master, to a process of self-improvement loosely guided by the community.

Finally, in the context of the present work, it is important to notice that the relevance of reflective thought goes beyond the spiritual renewal of the believer and holds an important place also in the transformation, in an Islamic direction, of state and society. Observation of nature and reflection on the universe not only shapes the individual's path toward experiencing the presence of God, but, as will be shown in the next chapter, also informs Nursi's political theology. Nursi, indeed, infers the rules that, according to Islam, should regulate governance among men, from the laws of nature. In his reasoning, Quranic lines and natural laws complement each other in delineating the proper Islamic configuration of the relationships among men in this world and the forms of governance they should establish (see Chapter 4).

### **3.5 From *tariqa* to *cemaat***

In the Risale religious communities are considered the foundation of society, as getting together is seen as a social need that originates from human nature. Communities are also needed because, if people remain isolated, they are offered little protection from the evils of society. Individuals are indeed not equipped to protect themselves from the attacks of the modern world and are not able to overcome by themselves the material and spiritual obstacles to the fulfilment of their religious duties (Güleçyüz, 2011: 7-9). The model for the organisation of these religious communities proposed by Nursi represents the other significant departure from classical Sufism. Followers of the Risale, indeed, not do form a *tariqa*, but give life to a *cemaat*, that is a community where there is no formal initiation of the adherents, no established and recognized hierarchy among the members, no official leadership, and hence no succession in leadership. However, while from a structural point of view these organizational patterns clearly differentiate the community from a Sufi *tariqa*, the feelings of

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<sup>43</sup> The quotation is taken from the section of the website [www.nurspirituality.org](http://www.nurspirituality.org), where the aims of the association (Nur Spirituality Institute) are explained.

companionship and affection established among Nur students are derived from Sufi repertoires of social connectivity. In this section I will first highlight this tension between rejecting the associational patterns of Sufism and simultaneously relying on Sufism for the construction of communitarian feelings, and will then point out the influence that the Turkish institutional and political context had on the organization of the community.

There is a concept of ‘sainthood’ within the Nur Community, in so far as its adherents regard Said Nursi as a *wali* (saint), but there is no notion of holy lineages. In Nursi’s view, what provides both cohesion and unity for the Risale is not the leadership of a single man, but the feeling of brotherhood among adherents. In describing the relationships among Nur students, he claims: ‘It is not the means which is between father and son, or *shaikh* and follower. It is the means of true brotherhood. [...] If our way had been that of subjection to a *shaikh*, there would have been a single rank, or limited ranks, and numerous capacities would have been appointed to them. There could have been envy and selfishness. But our way is brotherhood. There can be no position of father among brothers, nor can they assume the position of spiritual guide. The rank in brotherhood is broad; it cannot be the cause of envious jostling’ (The Rays: 216-220).

In keeping with the idea that there is no leadership in the Nur movement, Nursi in one of his letters encourages his supporters to express themselves in the following way: ‘We are the students of the Risale. Said too is a student like us. [...] Whatever Said does, even if he turns against the Risale, this will not shake our loyalty and interest’ (Emirdağ Lahikası: 122). As Karabaşoğlu (2003: 275) underlines, ‘this formula renders Nursi himself subservient to the Risale’. The statement has a double function. It aims at presenting the Risale as the greatest authority within the community, to whom even its own author has to submit. At the same time, it aspires at building a community where loyalty towards a master would be substituted by loyalty towards the text. The result is the elevation of the Risale to a sort authoritative guide capable of keeping the community together even in the absence of officially recognised leaders designated to succeed Nursi.

Together with the almost sacral respect for the Risale, what kept the community intact after the death of Said Nursi was the feeling of brotherhood among the adherents. According to Nur students, the feeling that defines this relationship of brotherhood is sincerity (*ihlas*). Sincerity is defined as the attitude of the man who ‘turns, with all of his strength, with candour and submission, to the aim of gaining God’s approval’ (Mürsel, 2005: 43). The



service of the faith (*iman hizmeti*) requires sincerity and candid sacrifice (*ihlas ve samimi bir fedakârlık*), because the pay-off of spiritual service cannot be expected in this world. Moreover, sincerity necessitates that there is no jealousy, dispute, or competition among Nur students, but only affection, unity and solidarity (Mürsel, 2005: 48).

At this point some words need to be spent on the way brotherhood is constructed in the Nur community and how this construction ties the *cemaat* to Sufism. Brian Silverstein, in his study of the Gümüşhanevi branch of the Naqshbandi order in Turkey argues that the Naqshbandi's performances of virtue are strongly connected to 'practices of self-formation and are embedded in networks of companionship and contexts of disciplined utterance' (Silverstein, 2013:44). Members of the order – the author argues – see in the practice of *sohbet* the essence of Islamic religiosity that is, the formation of moral dispositions through discourses and forms of companionship modelled on the Sunna of the Prophet. The emphasis on face-to-face interactions based on ritualized behavioural norms and on the feeling of 'love' (*sevgi* or *muhabbet*) between the trainees and the ones in the community that have already reached a level of 'ethical maturity' are expressions of what he calls 'discipline of presence'. With this phrase he means the influence that is exerted on adherents to the Sufi path thanks to repeated interactions within a specifically structured environment which, through an ethic of companionship, brings about embedded dispositions towards the respect of the will of God and the avoidance of sin (Silverstein, 2013: 44-45).

It is precisely the Sufi ethic of companionship described by Silverstein that, despite the removal of the figure of the *shaykh*, is at work in the Nur community when morality and the feeling of brotherhood are induced in Nur brothers. The crucial role that relationships of affection and bodily practices have in disciplining of the lower self (*nefs*) and creating a feeling of brotherhood in the Gülen and Nur communities has been emphasized and analysed in details by Fabio Vicini. The author describes the education techniques used by senior Nur students as 'pedagogies of affection'. With this definition he aims at pointing out how older brothers' carefully controlled actions and their exemplary behavior, together with the love (*sevgi*) and endearment (*okşamak*) they show, are more effective in training younger brothers in Islamic ethics and manners than plain verbal explanations or rigid methods based on discipline (Vicini, 2013a). These 'pedagogies of affection' work on the same line of the 'disciplines of presence' described by Silverstein in the sense that in both cases the formation of character is achieved through friendship and exemplary modes of conduct.

Significant in this context is also Vicini's elaboration of brotherhood, which in his work emerges as 'the latent socio-cultural pattern of interaction' that is experienced among members of the Nur and Gülen communities through sociability forms (Vicini, 2014: 93). By sociability he means the people's ability to inhabit a common social environment and relate to other people in the same environment by respecting precise behavioural criteria. These standardized manners of conduct cannot be reduced to the external enactment of habit, not only because they presuppose certain moral dispositions, but also because they are built on an idea of the self and of its relations with the other selves that is internalised through the collective readings of the Risale. In this sense, the idea of sociability encompasses a strong recognition of mutuality as the foundation of the horizontal relations of brotherhood. Moreover, the author argues that, despite the fact that Nur students discuss the idea of brotherhood during *sohbets*, they first experience brotherhood through sociability forms, since the latter bring about reciprocity among community members through purity and sincerity. Thus, through precise modes of behaviour – like talking softly, eating with modesty, maintaining certain body postures (for example not crossing one's legs), greeting brothers with certain respect forms – Nur students experience and construct brotherhood during the community's daily life (Vicini, 2014).

If the relationships established among Nur students are influenced by Sufi-inspired modes of sociability, the structure of the community was affected simultaneously by the abovementioned wish of Said Nursi to abandon the model of a *tariqa*, and by strict state surveillance. Given the lack of leadership and hierarchy, what distinguishes the members of the Nur community is not their higher or lower position, but their degree of involvement with the *cemaat* and their experience in the reading of the Risale. Figuratively, advancing in the community does not mean going up in a pyramid-like structure, but it means going toward the inside, in a structure described by Nursi as concentric circles. Clues about the nature of this concentric configuration can be found in various passages of the Risale, especially in Nursi's letters to his students. The most well-known description of the community's structure is the passage defining the adherents of the Risale as 'students' (*talebler*), 'brothers' (*abiler*) and 'friends' (*dostlar*). The first category is composed of people who 'know their vital duty, their life's work, to be the service and dissemination of the Risale'. The second includes people who 'perform the five daily prayers of the Muslims and do not commit the seven grievous sins, together with truly and earnestly working to disseminate the Risale', even though they do not consider that work to be their vital duty. The third category comprises people who

‘have to earnestly sympathize with our work and service [...] and they should not support in a heartfelt fashion injustice, innovation or misguidance, nor try to profit by them’ (The Letters: 404-405; Mürsel, 2005: 69-72).

The distinction between students, brothers and friends is the one that more accurately reflects the actual composition of the community. Gencel Sezgin argues that, by differentiating thanks to this three-layered structure the degree of devotion among the members and creating very strong bonds in the inner circle, Nur students would achieve two objectives. First, by making sure that only sincere and convinced community members could reach, after a certain amount of time and after displaying serious commitment, the level of ‘student’, they would impede intrusions by the state. Second, they made sure that initiates to the movement, before reaching the inner circle, would have had enough training and hence be prepared to bear more pressure from the outside and more responsibility in the inside (Gencel Sezgin, 2011: 99-100).

The repression Nur students faced after the foundation of the Republic influenced the *cemaat* not only in the classification of its members, but also in its organisation. The community presents indeed an open and flexible structure that is the result of a process of adaptation to the Turkish institutional context and to the country’s political instability. The above-quoted functionalist argument for the survival of Sufism proposed by Gilsenan does not apply to the case of the Nur community. In the midst of the secularisation policies implemented by the Republic, the strategies of survival adopted by the *cemaat* (as well as by other religious communities and Sufi brotherhoods) seem to have gone in the opposite direction of bureaucratization. The community took the shape of an informal associational network and avoided showing to the outside any signs of organisational status. The *cemaat*, in itself, is not a formal institution based on membership and subscription, it has no official statute and no formal methods of recruitment, and cannot be easily confined to any specific physical location. It manages to have legal representation thanks to a web of pious foundations (*vakıf*) and educational, cultural, and charitable associations (*dernek*) that are founded and run by community members, but are not legally nor officially related to the *cemaat*<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> It is worth noticing that in recent decades also from a structural point of view the net distinction between *cemaat* and *tariqa* in Turkey has faded away as a consequences of a process that some commentators have described as ‘*vakıf-icaion*’ (Yavuz, 2003: 133-150; White, 2002: 178-211) and ‘*cemaat-ification*’ (Silverstein, 2013: 53) of the Sufi orders. The first term refers to the increasingly high number of *vakıf* founded by Sufi orders as a means to legally carry out their activities without making explicit references to Sufism or publicly asserting the existence of the order. The second term, instead, refers to the fact that the dynamics of Sufi orders’ social life have become more informal and have evolved in a way that resembles those of the *cemaats*. In particular, the

### 3.6 The cemaat as a collective personality

The configuration of the community as a *cemaat* has a significance that certainly lies in the evolution of Sufism and in the adaptation to the Turkish political context, but it is not confined to these two aspects. Perhaps the most relevant feature of the *cemaat* for the purpose of the present study is its ability to develop into a collective personality. In the Risale it is stated that, through sincerity and brotherhood, members of the community form a ‘spiritual person’ or ‘collective personality’ (*şahs-ı manevi*) that is, a group of people that get together and act as one. The concept recurs often in the Risale in a variety of contexts, not only in reference to the *cemaat*, but also in reference to nature, to political currents and to the nation state. In general terms, it can be stated that a collective personality exists every time a more or less large group of natural elements or people merge to form a body (natural or social) that transcend the units it is made of. The notion of *şahs-ı manevi* holds great relevance within the theoretical architecture of the Risale because it indicates how Nur students perceive themselves as a collective agent, how they envision the relationship between the individual and the community (and by extension between the individual and society), and how they conceptualise the national social body. Moreover, the distinction between collective personality and individuality is utilised to vindicate Nur students’ active political involvement. The idea of the state as a collective personality will be examined in Chapter 4 and the justification of political activities will be analysed in Chapter 5. Here, instead, I focus on the way natural elements can be a *şahs-ı manevi* and on the way the community is thought of as collective personality.

As mentioned above, the concept of collective personality is not limited to the human beings but it is also applied to animate and inanimate species and entities that are said in the Quran to praise Allah with the ‘tongue of their condition’ or ‘tongue of disposition’ (*lisan-i hal*). Said Nursi in the Risale states, for example: ‘All mountains have a collective personality and offer glorification and worship in a way suitable to each. That is to say, just as through the mystery of echo all mountains recite glorification in the tongue of men, so too they glorify the All-Glorious Creator in their own particular tongues’ (The Words: 267). In line with the idea,

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notion of stages (*makam*) and ranks (*derece*) to be followed in order to reach spiritual maturity still operates, but it is less an object of discussion and concern than it was in the past (Silverstein, 2013: 53).

central to the Risale, that the natural world complements the Quran in delivering to men the message of God, Nursi often underlines in his commentary how natural elements and animals, in their own way and with their own language, worship God. When several natural features unite in this act of adoration – like a chain of mountains in the passage quoted – they take the form of a collective personality, through which their ability to venerate God intensifies.

The particular attention Said Nursi grants to the natural world often brings about parallels between nature and human societies. During a *sohbet* that addressed the topic of *şahs-i manevi* the following passage from the Risale was read: ‘If numerous things take on the form of collectivity, a collective personality comes into being. If such a collectivity fuses and become a unity, it will have a collective personality and a sort of spirit, which will represent it, and an appointed angel who will perform its duty of glorification. As an example, consider the plain tree in front of my room here [...]: see how many hundreds of tongues of smaller brunches there are on the three heads of the three main branches of its trunk. Study carefully how many hundreds of words of well-ordered and balanced fruits it has, and how many hundreds of letters of well proportionated winged seeds; just as you hear and see how eloquently it praises and glorifies the All-Glorious Maker, [...] so too the angel appointed to it represents its glorification with numerous tongues in the World of Meaning’ (The Words: 179). The lady that was leading the *sohbet* that day commented: ‘Our community is like the tree in front of Bediüzzaman’s room: it is made up of thousands of small particles that put together create something more than the sum of the parts. Thanks to its collective spirit, it is able to exalt Allah in an elevated way that the single particles are not able to achieve by themselves’<sup>45</sup>.

The characterisation of the *cemaat* as a collective personality is also in line with one of the feature of the Risale examined above: the divergence from Sufism and the adaptation of Islamic modes of cohesiveness to modern times. Bediüzzaman states that, while in the past era, which he defines as ‘the age of individuality’, individuals of great stature like Abdülkadir Geylani, Imam-i Gazali and Imam-i Rabbani had been sent to guide the Muslim community in accordance to Divine wisdom, the unprecedented difficulties and conditions of the present time demand a collective personality to undertake such duties (Tarihce-i Hayat: 342). What he means is that the social and spiritual problems posed by modern times are so challenging that no individual – no matter how gifted he is – is apt anymore to show the right path to believers.

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<sup>45</sup> A Meşveret *sohbet* in Ankara, May 2013.

Such a task can be carried out only by collective personalities, as they, by definition, are more powerful than any individual.

The confrontation with Sufism also emerges from another passage of the Risale: ‘This [one of the rules to obtain sincerity of belief] is to imagine your brother’s virtues and merits in your own selves and to thankfully take pride at their glory. The Sufi have terms they use among themselves, [like] “annihilation in the shaikh”, “annihilation in the Prophet”; I am not a Sufi, but these principles of theirs make a good rule in our way, in the form of “annihilation in the brother”. Among brothers this is called *tefâni* [literary empathy, affection or affiliation] that is, “annihilation in one another”. That is to say, to forget the feelings of one’s carnal soul, and live in one’s mind with one’s brothers’ virtues and feelings’ (The Flashes: 217). Here, one might notice the simultaneous departure from and continuation of Sufism, in the form of the same process of abandonment of the self to become one, no longer with the *shaikh*, but with fellow community members. In order to develop a collective personality, Nur students have to renounce all the demands of the ego; they have to transform the ‘I’ into the ‘We’. As one interviewee pointed out: ‘In order to create the large pool of the *şahs-i manevi*, the ego and personality which are like block of ice have to be cast into the pool and melted’ (IndIst02).

This melting process can take place only if community members look at themselves as organs of the same body, which cooperate for the correct functioning of the system. This idea was nicely expressed in a document handed to participants before a lesson on the *şahs-i manevi*<sup>46</sup>. The document made reference to the following passage of the Risale: ‘For just as one hand cannot compete with the other, so one eye cannot criticise the other, nor the tongue object to the ear, nor the heart see the spirit’s faults. Each of a person’s members completes the deficiencies of the others, veils their faults, assists their needs, and helps them out in their duties. Otherwise his life would be extinguished, his spirit flee and his body fall apart (The Flashes: 214)’. In the document the passage was clarified in the following way: ‘In the same way that the hand does not dominate the eye, and the eye does not control the ear, and the ear does not govern the tongue, and they all contribute to belief without pushing forward their tasks, in the service of the Risale every organ carries out its own duty and works for the life and continuity of that collective personality worth the title of “perfect person” (*insan-i kamil*). Can the eye say to the hand: “I can see, why can’t you see?” Can the hand say the eye: “I can write, why can’t you write?”. This means that all the members and organs work to bring the

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<sup>46</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet*, December 2013.

people of faith to the shore of salvation according to their capacities and without deviating from their tasks'. The passage, once again, underlines the lack of hierarchies within the community, as everybody works according to his abilities and everybody's contribution is equally valuable.

While the metaphor of the organs of the body clearly expresses peaceful cooperation among community members, the concept of 'annihilation into the brother' raises questions about the relationship between the individual and the community: Do community members cease to exist as individuals when they enter the *cemaat*? Does the *cemaat* erase any form of individuality? The answer, according to Nur students, is no. Some of the interviewees underlined that being part of a *cemaat* not only does not hinder individual growth, but also – on the contrary – enhances self-development in unforeseen ways. If people remain isolated – they explained – with their independent efforts they can develop their potentialities only up to a certain stage, whereas if they are part of a community their intellectual and spiritual capacities may be strengthened to reach an optimum level (YAIst02; IndIst02). To clarify why this is the case, two of my interviewees quoted the following passage from the Risale: 'The underlying reason for this mystery [the mystery of brotherhood] is this: each member of a true, sincere union may see with the eyes of the other brothers, and hear with their ears, as if each person of a true union of ten [people] acquires the value and strength to see with twenty eyes, think with ten minds, hear with twenty ears, and work with twenty hands' (The Flashes: 215; YAIst02; IndIst02).

Moreover, it is often underlined that, since the collective personality of the community is made up of individual people, it is necessary that members do not lose their individuality when entering the *cemaat*. The balance between the individual and community is the following: on the one hand, the individual has to utilise his abilities in a way that gives strength to the spiritual person the community formed and, on the other hand, the individual cannot be sacrificed for the sake of the community (YAIst02; Güleçyüz, 2011: 13-15). This means that individual rights and needs cannot be forgone in the name of higher ends pursued in the name of the community.

The recognition of the persistence of individual personalities within the collective personality is based on a sophisticated distinction between *enaniyet* (the cult of the self) and *ferdiyet* (individuality). While the precise meaning of *enaniyet* and *ferdiyet* will be examined in depth in the next chapter, here it suffices to say that the cult of the self, the persuasion of being

independent from an All-powerful God, is the feeling that needs to be halted while maintaining individuality. Besides protecting community members' uniqueness, the distinction between the collective personality and the individual also set the theoretical ground to justify Nur students' involvement with politics (Chapter 5). It moreover helps to isolate and protect the community from the mistakes and faults of its members. It is so because, while the virtues and capacities of the members contribute to the strength of the community, sins and errors of the individual cannot be ascribed to the collective personality. It can be stated, then, that the recognition of the existence of individuality within the collectivity aims at shielding the community and its members from each other. The distinction serves indeed the double function of protecting community members from the risk of being completely absorbed by the community on the one hand, and protecting the community from the risk of being attributed the errors of its members on the other hand.

Finally, it is important to underline the connection between *şahs-i manevi* and salvation. Nursi states: 'O Risale-i Nur students and servants of the Quran! You and I are members of such a collective personality, worthy of the title of the perfect man. We are like the components of a factory's machinery which produces eternal happiness within eternal life. We are hands working on a dominical boat which will disembark the community of Muhammad (PBUH) at the realm of peace, the shore of salvation. So we are surely in need of solidarity and true union, obtained through gaining sincerity [...] indeed we are compelled to obtain it' (The Flashes: 214).

Belonging the *şahs-i manevi* brings about also a particular approach to death. Nursi explains: 'Through the mystery of sincere solidarity and union produce innumerable benefits, and are also an effective shield and point of support against fear, and even death. For if death comes, it takes one spirit. But since through the mystery of true brotherhood on the way of divine pleasure in works connected with the hereafter there are spirits to the number of brothers, if one of them dies he meets death happily saying: "My other spirits remain alive, for they in effect make life continue for me by constantly earning me reward, so I am not dying. I live in respect of merit through their spirits; I am only dying in respect of sin". And he lays down in peace' (The Flashes: 215).

These passages from the Risale exemplify how for Nur students being part of the community ensures salvation, an element that makes apt the definition of the cemaat as a 'charismatic community'. According to Montgomery Watt, the conception of the charismatic community



is in contrast with that of the charismatic leader. The contrast is not an absolute one, since the charismatic community might have been founded by a charismatic leader. However, while for some men salvation is to be attained by following a charismatic leader, for others salvation comes through membership of a charismatic community. In some cases a synthesis of the two conceptions might be effected (Watt, 1960). The Nur community was doubtlessly founded by a charismatic leader. He, nevertheless, prepared the ground in his commentary for the transformation of his community into a charismatic one after his death. Moreover, the charismatic nature of the community makes it necessary that the cemaat is insulated from the sins of its components, an objective that is achieved through the distinction between individuality and collectivity.

### **3.7 Nursi's collective personality and Durkheim's moral individualism**

It can be argued that Nursi's emphasis on the social process through which human beings, by uniting under the same beliefs, surpass their individuality is Durkheimian in nature. To recognise that, first of all we have to recall Durkheim's understanding of society. According to the scholar, society is the 'collective consciousness' that is created when 'individual consciousness', that is, the different ways of thinking and behaving of different individuals, unite together from a totality that is something more than the sum of the parts that it is comprised of. Moreover, Durkheim 'clearly articulated the notion that the ultimate roots of the social are religious' (Turner, 2011: 31). In *The Elementary Forms* (1964), the author affirms that religious systems correspond to society's self-representation, in the sense that religious and moral ideas articulate and give symbolic expression to society's conception of itself and thereby 'produce' society, in the sense that make its very existence possible.

However, as Tole argues, the fact that Durkheim gives priority to ideal factors in social evolution does not mean that he does not take into consideration material influences (Tole, 1993: 12). In *The Division of Labor in Society* (1968) he accounts for the rise of individualism in modern society and argues that the latter was concomitant to the shift, brought about by the division of labour, from the homogeneity of pre-modern society to the differentiation of modern society. In pre-modern societies social membership was fixed: individuals could not easily change the social group they belonged to and adhered to the beliefs of the community they were part of. In modern society, instead, social membership is fluid: individuals can freely choose among different groups and beliefs. This contrast is expressed in Durkheim's

notions of mechanical (pre-modern) and organic (modern) solidarity. Societies that function according to mechanical solidarity are characterised by low individualism, low social differentiation, strong social cohesion and a shared belief in rituals, whereas societies based on organic solidarity feature high individualism, high social differentiation, weak social cohesion and minimal agreement about beliefs and rituals. When confronted with changing socio-economic structures, the collective consciousness of pre-modern society, which was impregnated with religious doctrines, gradually loses its grasp on the individual and new opportunities emerge for self-expression and self-determination.

How, then, is it possible for religion to maintain its significance in a society which is highly differentiated and deeply individualistic? What can offset, from a moral point of view the anomie of the contemporary world? Durkheim answers these questions with his notion of the 'cult of the individual' or 'religion of humanity. Nursi's response, instead, lies in his articulation of the concept of collective personality. At first glance, the two solutions might seem to be poles apart, but a closer look at Durkheim's theory reveals that this is not actually the case.

For Durkheim, individuals in modern society develop, thanks to the division of labour, a more clear awareness of their dependence on others, in particular with regards to the goods they are not able to produce and the functions they are not able to perform. Thus, mutual obligations do not decrease; there is not a weakening, but a transformation of the social bond. This new interdependence promotes a form of solidarity which is based on a system of reciprocal rights and duties and is consequently higher than the one existing in traditional societies (Tole, 1993: 14-15). In this way the division of labour makes the individual 'an integral part of the whole' (Durkheim, 1968: 398). At the same time, he argued that while becoming more intangible, general, and detached from religious systems, the collective consciousness of modern society maintains in part the profound shared feelings and principles of the collective consciousness of pre-modern society. In this context, as all other beliefs take on a less and less religious character, the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion. '[...] it is thus, if one wishes, a common cult, but it is possible only by the ruin of all others' (Durkheim, 1968: 172). Durkheim refers to this new form of religion as 'the cult of the individual', a new system where the individual constitutes the primary source of ethics and communal ties and represents the repository of society's deepest ideals and values.

Thus, the individualism the scholar postulates is not the utilitarian individualism of the Enlightenment that, rejecting the many bonds existing between human beings, reduces society to a web of relationships among ‘independent forces’, and takes the individual as an autonomous authority which needs no legitimation other than itself (Durkheim, 1973: 38). In order to make clear his position, Durkheim distinguishes between ‘egoistic individualism’ and ‘moral individualism’. The first is a utilitarian model of morality based on rational behaviour and self-interest. The second is instead a form of altruism that enables human beings to transcend their natural self-centeredness. Accordingly, moral individualism is not the acclamation of the self, the particular individual, but of the ‘individual in general’. It is characterised by sympathy towards human suffering and a desire for justice (Durkheim, 1973:49). It empowers the individual to overcome both egoism and isolation and enjoins him to society by virtue of his commonality with it. It is a commitment to the common good, as opposed to the selfish pursuit of personal goals.

For Nursi, the way in which religion can survive in modern society is through the formation of (moral and religious) collective personalities. The scholar claims that, in an era in which religious beliefs and practices are threatened by rationalism and atheism on the one hand, and materialism and individualism on the other hand, men, in order to rediscover faith and morality, have to abandon themselves to the collectivity of the *shahs-i manevi*. In the Risale, however, the characteristics of the collective personality go beyond the religious community and are attributed to society at large. Here it is necessary to recall three elements of the thought of Said Nursi which will be developed further in the next chapter: the first is that, as hinted at above, the state is defined as *shahs-i manevi*; the second is that modern society is unavoidably composed of different occupational groups that reflect individual aspirations, abilities and vocations and that generate solidarity through mutual services and sustenance; the third is that, just like in the community, in society the rights of the individual cannot be sacrificed for the general interests.

If the notion of *shahs-i manevi* is placed within the general framework of Nursi’s theory of society, two points become immediately evident. The first is that in the Risale society is seen as a reproduction in larger scale of a religious moral community and that, conversely, the community represents a virtuous model of society. Just like the community, the society and the state are held together by bonds created by the belief in common principles and by the differentiation of tasks among members. Second, just like the community, the society and the state are composed of people who, in the process of creating a totality, and while abandoning

themselves to this totality, simultaneously maintain their individuality and transcend their ego. As a consequence, on the one hand, common good cannot be pursued at the price of damaging individual rights and, on the other hand, collective interest is obtained when individual interests are surpassed.

In this light, the similarity between Nursi's collective personality and Durkheim's moral individualism becomes clearer. For Durkheim moral individualism does not represent the disappearance of religion, but simply its transformation. Indeed, in its new shape of moral individualism, religion continues to 'serve to balance the competing, apparently irreconcilable interests of society in collective welfare with the ever greater demands of individuals for self-determination' (Tole, 1993: 3). In other words, for both scholars modern society is sustained by a commonality that is based on shared beliefs and enables the individual to simultaneously affirm and transcend his individuality. The obvious difference is that this commonality is secular humanism for Durkheim, whereas for Said Nursi it is the Islamic faith. Finally, in both authors there is a strong ethical tension in the process of going beyond the self, seen as a virtuous act that leads to a morally and spiritually higher form of selfhood.

### **3.8 The organisation of *sohbet***

Now that the functions and implications of the community's configuration as a cemaat have been clarified, we can move on to a description of the way *sohbet*, the main activity of the group, is carried out. In this section I outline the organisation of *sohbet* meetings in order to point out how the thought of Said Nursi is re-elaborated and internalised by members of the community and how meanings and interpretations are created and secured.

Collective readings of the Risale can be held in public buildings, usually belonging to the municipalities, or, as is more common, in private houses. Lessons are organised for men and women separately. Only in the Yeni Nesil group do some older male students like Mehmet Fırıncı or Ümit Şimşek, who are considered extremely advanced in the understanding of the Risale, take part both in lessons directed at men and in those directed at women. Students are also divided into reading groups according to age. The community makes sure that groups of young boys and girls work under the supervision of elder (respectively male and female) members. This is achieved thanks to the shifts that elders make to participate in younger students' meetings.

The *sohbets* start and end with prayers and are followed by the distribution of snacks and tea, a practice which is called *ikram* (offer). These refreshments are accompanied by informal, everyday conversations and are an opportunity for socialisation. It is during these post-lesson conversations that Nur students get to know each other, establish ties and, eventually, develop friendships<sup>47</sup>. These exchanges also offer an opportunity to ask for, or give, advice on everyday issues. In this context, community members can seek advice about problems they might be having at the workplace, in their marital relationship, or in the process of raising children. Similarly, they can ask questions about Islamic regulations regarding prayers, ablution, fasting, finances or clothing. Thus, *sohbets* are not only meetings in which the Risale are read, but also where everyday problems are discussed, solutions are suggested, and comfort and support are offered. The other side of the coin of these informal conversations is the pressure, sometimes exerted on community members, to conform to what is considered to be the correct and moral Islamic behaviour. Participants to the *sohbets* might be reprimanded, albeit gently, by their fellow community members about certain habits or choices that are deemed inappropriate, and can be pushed to adjust their manner to the criteria of the *cemaat*. Discussions about day-to-day issues and discreet admonition, work together to create a homogeneous community where disagreement is minimised and daily conduct is standardised.

During the reading part of the *sohbet*, people sit in a circle and read out loud and comment in turn. Due to this procedure, the lesson gives the impression of a non-hierarchical system where everybody is on the same level and everybody brings his/her own contribution to the interpretation of the thought of Said Nursi. However, in fact the *sohbets* are led by the more experienced and learned students in the case of lessons directed at adults, and by elder students in case of lessons directed at youths. These more advanced students decide which part of the Risale will be read during the lesson, give definitions of difficult concepts, and have the final say in the interpretation of controversial passages. Participants are frequently asked to attempt a paraphrase of Nursi's words and are encouraged to share their thoughts with the group, but authoritative members make sure that the final summary of Nursi's arguments presented during the *sohbet* conforms to the standard interpretation of the Risale.

In the case of the Yeni Nesil group in Istanbul, people who lead the *sohbets* might also participate in lessons that are organised in the Nesil publishing house. Here *sohbets* are

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<sup>47</sup> For a detailed analysis of sociability practices among Nur students see Vicini, 2013a, 2013b, and 2014.

directed by the public figures of the community in turn, and take on a different form. They are open to both men and women. Chairs are not set out in a circle, but one behind the other in a conference room, with men sitting on the left, and women sitting on the right. The men that lead these lessons, who are called *hoca* (teacher) by the other students, sit at a desk located on the stage of the conference room. The desk is positioned in a way that allows the *hoca* to look both at the students and at the wall where the text to be read is projected. The teachers are the only ones reading and commenting; students interrupt them only if they have questions. At the end of the *sohbet* students take turns at presenting definitions of ‘concepts’ (*kavram*) that are significant in the Risale. The objective of this exercise is to reconstruct the meaning that Said Nursi in his work attributed to theological notions. The definitions prepared by the students are projected on the wall, so that everybody can read them and the *hoca* can comment on them. This work on definitions adds a new dimension to the practice of studying the Risale: the written re-elaboration of the text. Also, compared to the other *sohbets*, these lessons present a higher level of abstraction and sophistication, since in this case the aim shifts from the training of the Islamic self and the cultivation of piety, to pure theological reasoning.

From a hierarchical point of view, people that participate in these lessons represent an intermediate level of guidance, given that they are trained in the interpretation of the Risale by authoritative elders and are charged with the duty of reproducing this interpretation, through other *sohbets*, or through their work in the publishing house. Half of the students that take part in these lessons are employed in the publishing house. They edit the publications that have a theological nature and make sure that they conform to the agreed interpretation of the Risale. They also organise lessons to be held for the employees of the publishing house who are not Nur students themselves. The other half leads *sohbets* with less experienced students outside the publishing house; they do it by using the same metaphors, examples, and explanations they were taught. Among the people who participate in these *sohbets* directed at less knowledgeable community members, those who are more successful in learning the Risale receive special attention, until they reach a level of expertise that allows them to guide other *sohbets* with a different group of people. It is this technique of ‘training the trainer’ that ensures the perpetuation of meaning within the community across space and time<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> The practice of ‘training the trainer’ is also followed in sub-groups whose publishing houses do not play such an important role in the interpretation of the Risale. In these cases, women who lead female *sohbets* are the

### 3.9 The organisation of *hizmet*

Around the core activity of *sohbet*, many other practices and initiatives are carried out by Nur students. All these actions, combined together, constitute the *hizmet*, the service for the Risale performed in the name of Islam. It is to the organisation of this ‘service’ that this section is devoted. Beddiuzzaman defined the *hizmet* as a ‘lesson of Quran which aims at announcement’ (*tebliğ maksatlı Kuran dersi*)<sup>49</sup>. As stated earlier, the priority for the community is to reinforce people’s belief in God. This is because faith is not only considered to be the path to salvation, but also the solution to all social problems. The community’s system of priorities was explained by an interviewee in the following way: ‘During the Second World War Said Nursi did not follow the news and seemed uninterested in what was going on in the world. His students went to him and said: ‘You never say anything about the war. Why is that? Is there something more important than the war that we are not aware of? Or maybe there is harm in wanting to know what is happening?’ Said Nursi replied: ‘If you watch with excessive interest even something as simple as a football match, you start taking one side and became fanatic. It is the same for the world war. If you support one side, you end up supporting also its sins. I do not want to be part of the sins of Germany or Russia; they both kill civilians’ [...] After clarifying the harm of being too interested in the war he explained to his followers what was more important than the war. Here he gives the example of the ten concentric circles. ‘The first circle, the one which is the smallest and is on the inside, is the circle of the heart (*kalp*); the second is the body (*beden*); the third is the family (*hane*); the fourth is the neighbourhood (*mahalle*); the fifth is the city where you live in (*şehir*); the sixth is the homeland (*vatan*); the seventh is the place where you were born (*memleket*); the eighth is the earth (*küre-i arz*); the ninth is the humanity (*insanlık*); the tenth is all the living beings (*zihayat*) [angels included]. You are responsible for all of these circles, but to different degrees. The smaller the circle, the bigger your responsibility. This means that you have to take care first of all of your heart, then of your body, then of your family. Only if you have some leftover energy can you take care of the rest. On the doomsday you will be certainly considered accountable for yourself, but you will be not considered accountable for the entire humanity. If you pay too much attention to what is happening in your country or in the world your head gets tired. If you constantly think about the bigger circles you forget about yourself, your heart gets dark and you lose the faith. This is why you cannot start with

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daughters and wives of authoritative community members who were instructed in the reading of the Risale at home by their fathers or husbands.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Mürsel, 2005: 49.

the nation, as some Muslim scholars think, you have to start with the individual. Since it is not possible to put a police officer next to each person, it is necessary to put a police officer inside each person' (YAIst06, quoting The Stuff of Moses, 4<sup>th</sup> issue).

Nursi's diversification of man's duty in ten concentric circles is first of all an exhortation directing the believer to concentrate his effort on the purification of his own soul. It is then an invitation to strengthen the belief in Allah in the people that are around him, without getting distracted by national political issues. This is a view that considers individual faith as a priority both in terms of importance and in terms of temporality, in the sense that social and national problems can be addressed only *if* and only *after* a bright and sound faith is built in the hearts of single citizens.

Nur students, then, besides reading the Risale constantly, try to spread the content of the text as much as they can in the environment where they live, in a sort of relentless effort of proselytising. This practice of 'conveying' the message of Islam is referred to by the adherent of the movement as *tebliğ* (conveyance). Thus, Nur students regularly have reading sessions of the Risale at home with their families, and often invite to these meetings their neighbours, friends or co-workers. When the situation arises, they give pocket-sized copies of the Risale to people they meet in their daily lives. If there is a need to be subtler, they might start a conversation on a random topic with the person they intend to initiate to the Risale, which eventually leads to a discussion of Bediüzzaman's teachings or deeds. The technique of discussing subjects not directly related to religion to then introduce concepts drawn from the Risale might be used with anybody, also an unknown person, in a variety of contexts (with the obvious limitation of gender segregation). A woman on the bus who is reading a religious book, a drunk youth who is walking down the street, a man who comes to the mosque for the first time, mothers meeting outside the school when it is time to pick up their children, a customer that comes to the shop to buy something, or a tourist that asks for information are all potential Nur students with whom it might be worthwhile starting a conversation.

The duty of spreading the Risale into the world holds such a central place in the practices of Nur students that some people within the community devote their entire life to this aim. These people are called *vakıf* (literally 'endowed'). They are usually men (although there are some endowed women) who decide to serve the community by abandoning any activity or responsibility other than the *hizmet*. They do not get married, very rarely visit their families, do not have jobs, live in the derhanes and are financially supported by the community. The



model for this kind of choice is found in the *Ashab al-Suffa* (literally the Companions of the Porch), that is, the self-scarifying companions of the Prophet who lived away from their families, free from worldly concerns and troubles, and spent their entire lives first memorising the Quran and the words of the Prophet in Medina, and then spreading the message of Islam around the world (YNIst18; YNIst19).

*Vakıfs* living together in the *dershane* can be assigned different tasks. During a typical day, they all wake up for morning prayers and have a collective Risale lesson immediately after. They are then allowed to go back to sleep for a couple of hours. During the rest of the morning until the mid-day prayer, they concentrate on the individual, silent study of the Risale. In the afternoon each *vakıf* works in the field of *hizmet* that was assigned to him. Some of them are responsible for the education university students receive in the *dershanes*; others organise study circles and leisure activities with middle and high school children; others take care of the relationships with the *esnaf* (a social category that comprises artisans, shopkeepers and tradesmen). While the firsts two tasks are important to raise new generations in the light of the Risale<sup>50</sup>, the last task is fundamental to create webs of relationships within neighbourhoods and to initiate new people to the Risale. *Vakıfs* who are entrusted with building and maintaining relationships with *esnafs* visit workplaces (shop, factories, companies) on a daily basis and there they organise reading sessions of the Risale. During the lesson the owner of the shop or of the company might invite the neighbours, other shopkeepers, or workers from other companies or factories. Moreover, the *vakıf* might spend some time after the *sohbet* in the workplace and entertain in informal conversations with workers and clients. In this way more people are ‘invited’ (*davet etmek*) to the Risale, ties are built and a network of shops and companies devoted to the Risale is created. While factories and companies might not be part of a neighbourhood system, small stores certainly are. When *sohbets* are held in the same shop for many continuous years, that shop becomes a reference point in the neighbourhood, a centre of discussion and confrontation, a place where anybody can go if they are in the mood for religious conversations (YNIst18; YNIst19; Meşİsp02; Meşİsp03).

Before closing this description of Nur students’ proselytising activities, it is important to underline that for members of the community, *tebliğ* ends with transmitting the message of

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<sup>50</sup> There are very few female *vakıf* because the community prefers that women contribute to society by being wives and mothers. *Dershanes* for female students are controlled by women who, while living their normal lives, take on the role of ‘house mother’ (*ev annesi*), visit the *dershane* every day to make sure that girls behave according to rules and are responsible for the girls’ material and spiritual well-being.

the Risale. They believe that, while it is their duty to read the Risale to people they meet in their lives, it is not their responsibility to convince them. Opening people's heart to Divine truth is, indeed, something that only God can do. This theme was addressed in a *sohbet*: 'We cannot interfere with God's job. Making the truth accepted in the soul can be only His job. We have to focus on *tebliğ* no matter what the results are. In the Quran our Lord says: "Nothing is incumbent on the Prophet but delivering the message" (Q. 5: 99) So, we do not interfere in the shoots produced by the seed of truth we have sewn in people's hearts. Hearts are in the hand of God's power and only He can bestow guidance. Only Divine Will can make us successful and smite our opponents. If we lose we do not have to consider this a flaw of our spiritual force. We have to be convinced of that'.<sup>51</sup>

The idea that people cannot be forced into conversion is also often expressed by Nur students through the following story: 'Omar [the second caliph in Islamic history] was known for his justice [...] During the year of his caliphate a woman whose economic conditions were not very good came to him and said she was in need for help. At that time the *Bayt al-Mal* system was in force [a system founded by Omar that organised the gathering of funds for poor people, orphans and elders] and Omar said "Ok, starting from tomorrow we will insert you in the *muali* system so that you can get the help you need". When the woman was about to leave, he understood from her clothes that she was not a Muslim and asked her: "While people are coming in their masses to Islam what is holding you back from converting?". She replied: "I still do not feel like becoming a Muslim". Then she went away. After she left, a doubt fell into the heart of Omar and he asked to himself: "Is it possible that by asking that question I have pressured that woman to convert to Islam? Have I forced her?" He thought so because he was the caliph. Certainly the caliph's words do not have the same effect as other people's [regular people's] words have. Omar had this doubt because in the Sacred Quran there is a line that says: "There is no coercion in religion" (Q. 2:256). So he thought that, if he had forced that woman, he needed to repent and ask Allah for forgiveness. The companions that were with him reassured him that he had not forced anybody, but he still was not convinced and asked Allah to be forgiven'.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, pious foundations (also called *vakıf*) and associations (*dernek*) run by the community also play an important role for the organisation of the *hizmet*. As underlined in the previous chapter, over the years Nur students have established hundreds of foundations and

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<sup>51</sup> A Yeni Asya *sohbet* in Izmir, March 2013

<sup>52</sup> I am reporting this story as it was told to me by YNIst01, but I heard it several times during the fieldwork.

associations all over Turkey. The aim of these institutions is to reach a wider public and to carry on the *hizmet* in a more formal way. They own the property of the *dershanes*; schedule conferences on various topics; arrange trips to the places where Bediüzzaman lived and collaborate with municipalities in the organisation of cultural activities for the citizens. The tactic of founding a different association in each town or several associations with different scopes in the same town, instead of having one national association with multiple local brunches, is a the result of a residual fear of state persecution and works as a shield against political instability. In the case of a sudden change of direction in Turkish politics, or in case of government overthrown by the military, it would take a single court decision to shut down a national foundation with all of its local brunches, whereas, in order to close multiple independent local foundations, the state would need many investigations, many judges, many trials and many sentences. This would give Nur students time to take protective measurements and to re-group themselves, should the political landscape be abruptly modified.

### **3.10 Consultation among Nur students**

Finally, the mechanism through which decisions are taken in the community deserves some attention. As touched upon in the previous chapter, social, political, economic, and logistical issues are discussed during consultation meetings (*meşveret*) among Nur students at both the local and national level. Said Nursi advised his followers to proceed in this way, insisting on this point especially in the last letters sent to his students, where he underlined how the model for this decision-taking method comes from the Prophet and the community of Medina. Each sub-group within the Nur movement practices consultation within itself, with the only exception of occasional cooperation between the *Meşveret* and the *Yeni Nesil* groups. I will outline the way in which consultation is practiced by the *Meşveret* and the *Yeni Asya* sections of the community.

The *Meşveret* group organises regional and national *istişaret* (consultations) and when looking at the way they organise the meetings we find, once again, old habits born out of state repression. In the 1960s and '70s, the group became accustomed to meeting informally and nowadays it has no official secretariat that keeps records of the summits. Regional *istişaret* are held every month and five to ten people participate. National *istişaret* are instead held every two or three months, according to needs, and around fifty to sixty people participate in these. Every town sends representatives to regional meetings. If there is an *ağabey* in town,

community members send him; if there is not, they elect delegates among themselves and change the delegates for every new consultation. Elections of representatives to national summits are instead held during regional assemblies. All cities and towns in Turkey host the *istişaret* in turn. Designated people are called to the meetings through personal phone calls or e-mails. Requests concerning topics to be discussed are gathered from the internet. Some of the issues that tend to be debated include: how to arrange *sohbet*; how to organise the work of *vakıfs* (intended as people); how to raise the funds to maintain the *dershanes*; who to vote for in a local or general political election; what to vote for in a referendum. During the assemblies, issues are debated by using the *Risale* as a reference point – that is, by reading passages from the text that are relevant to the discussion. Finally, the decisions taken are written down and circulated, again through mailing lists, among community members (Meşİst01; MeşGaz01; Meşİzm02).

The Yeni Asya group practices *istişaret* in a rather more formal and structured way: the group divided Turkey in eight regions; people that take part in the meetings are always elected; consultation at provincial level takes place every month or every three months, according to needs, and around thirty people participate; representatives are elected by the entire local community; and, consultation meetings at regional level are held two to three times a year. People that are in the provincial consultation choose one representative to attend the regional consultation. Around thirty people participate, depending on population, size of the region, and intensity of *hizmet*. For national *meşveret* every province sends one or more representative according to its size and population (for example, Muğla sends one person, Istanbul sends five people). Around three hundred people participate in national meetings. Topics to be discussed might be raised in the *dershanes* and might reach national *meşveret* through the intermediates steps of provincial and regional consultations. Usually issues related to *hizmet* are discussed, but from time to time the debate focuses on political matters. Discussions are structured in question and answer format. General questions are addressed to the group and anybody in the group can give an answer. Questions relative to a specific *hizmet*, instead, are directed to and answered by the specific person or group of people responsible for that particular *hizmet*. There are provincial, regional, and national secretariats. National meetings are held in the headquarters of the Yeni Asya newspaper and the decisions are published in the newspaper. Decisions taken at provincial and regional level are instead published in pamphlets distributed locally with the Yeni Asya newspaper. Finally, it is worth

noting that the exact same system is followed by women, who hold parallel meetings at provincial, regional, and national levels (YAIst02; YAIst05; YAIst08; YAIzm02).

Decisions taken through consultation are binding for community members. One of the interviewees, himself elected several times to participate in regional and national meetings, explained this point in the following way: ‘At the time of the Battle of Uhud, when the enemies were coming, Muhammad suggested that Muslims should fight inside the city of Medina. Some of the companions instead proposed to face the enemies outside the city. A consultation was held and the majority voted for fighting the enemies outside the city. Some of the companions who sided with Muhammad’s suggestion criticised the others for going against the will of the Prophet and invited them to apologise to him. But Muhammad said: “No apologies are needed. We had a consultation and now we will do what the majority had voted for”. So Muslims, including the Prophet, exited the city to confront the enemies. Many of the companions, included the Prophet’s uncle Hamza, lost their lives [so the strategy proposed by Muhammad was the better one]. As the example of the Prophet shows, decisions that have been taken need to be respected. Let’s say that there is a referendum. I think I should vote no, but *meşveret* decides to vote yes. If I vote yes, against my personal opinion, I gain rewards from Allah (*sevap kazanıyorum*). It is so because, if I was wrong and the right choice was yes, I both vote correctly and abide to the *meşveret* decision. If I was right, and the correct choice was no, I still get credit for abiding to the *meşveret* decision. The most important thing is consultation, because it is the command of Allah’ (YAIst08).

What this interview shows is that Nur students hold the mechanism of collective decision taking in high esteem. The narrative built around the battle of Uhud gives historical depth to the practice and, by recalling how the Prophet himself accepted the outcome of consultation against his own opinion, confers to it a sort of sacredness. Nevertheless, the narrative is sometimes used to coerce community members into political behaviour they do not endorse. The great majority of times there is no need for such coercion. Usually the results of *meşveret* are agreed upon and peacefully accepted by community members who have no problems respecting the community’s decision, since the latter reflect their way of thinking and their dispositions. Still, from time to time there are cases of single members silently acting against or explicitly rebelling against the community’s deliberations, particularly on political matters. In these cases, lack of compliance usually results in the defiant member’s expulsion from the

movement<sup>53</sup>. There is indeed an element of psychological pressure in the community that runs contrary to the very spirit of collective personality, and that is reinforced by the holy inviolability attributed to consultation.

### 3.11 Conclusions

In this chapter I presented a ‘map’ of the movement that was intended to guide the reader through the nature of the text around which the community is gathered, the structure of the movement, the organisation of its activities, the mechanisms it employs to preserve a unitary interpretation of the Risale during *sohbets*, and the methods of decision making. I argued that the configuration of the community is the result of two processes of adaptation: on the one hand the adjustment to an institutional context whose defining features are those established by the Kemalist regime and, on the other hand, the reworking of Islamic modes of cohesiveness to make them appropriate to modernity. In the face of judicial persecution and political instability the community developed flexible and informal structures that would allow it some margin of manoeuvre in case of unexpected lawsuits or sudden regime changes. To respond to the religious and spiritual needs of men in modern society Nursi fostered the formation of a religious *cemaat* that, while maintaining the spiritual unity of Sufism, established horizontal relationships among adherents. The scholar defines this new form of collectivity as ‘collective personality’, a concept that can be regarded as Durkheimian in the sense that it envisions the coming together of individual consciousness that, once united, form a totality able to transcend the parts it is made of. Through this collective personality community members learn to simultaneously maintain their individuality and go beyond their ego, in a process that culminates in a higher form of selfhood. The idea of collective personality holds great relevance in Nursi’s theory of state and society and its full significance from a socio-political point of view will be understood better in the next chapter.

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<sup>53</sup> Stories of lack of compliance and subsequent expulsion were recounted to me by YNIst12; MedIst02; MedIst03; Med, Urf01; IndIst01; IndAnk01; ExtIst03

## Chapter 4

# Learning about God and becoming good citizens: Nur students' socio-political imaginary

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims at reconstructing Nur students' socio-political imaginary. The argumentation will be developed through a varied use of segments of the *Risale-i Nur*, extracts from *sohbet* meetings and interviews, documents and radio programmes published and broadcasted by the community, and scholarly articles and books written by and directed at community members. The discussion will start with purely theological matters, like the characterisation of personhood, the definition of rationality, the logical demonstration of Divine truths, and the reconciliation of Divine destiny with free will. These theological doctrines are the foundations on which Nursi's socio-political were built. Accordingly, it is only once they have internalised the former, that newcomers to the community can engage in a study of the latter. After discussing theological topics, this chapter, following the steps of Nur students' education, moves on to describe community members' understanding of concepts like *shari'a*, justice, freedom, democracy and *jihad*, and their take on collective responsibility and social action. Through the reading of the *Risale* and the participation in *sohbet* meetings, I argue, Nur students interiorise a coherent system of thought in which the political is dependent on the theological and everyday ethics is connected to the ethics of governance. In this way, they learn to be good Muslims and, at the same time, good citizens, in a process that renders faith as the foundational element of citizenship.

With regard to the sources, while for theological subjects the entire corpus of the *Risale* is relevant, for the discussion of socio-political matters particularly significant are the texts Said Nursi wrote during and after the 1908 revolution: The *Hürriyete Hitap* (Address to Freedom) and the *Münazarat* (Conversations). The *Hürriyete Hitap* is the speech Said Nursi delivered in Istanbul and Salonika in the aftermath of the declaration of the 1908 constitution. The *Münazarat* was written after the trip he made to south East Anatolia with the aim to teach to the population of that area the meaning and the beauty of constitutional monarchy (*meşrutiyet*) (see Chapter 2). The book is an out-and-out lesson in politics, as it is a collection, in the form of questions and answers, of the conversations Said Nursi had with the people he

met during his trip. It is also a very interesting text from a socio-historical point of view because it reveals the doubts, hopes and fears ordinary Ottomans, located far from the centre of the Empire, had in the aftermath of the revolution that changed the nature of the state. Moreover, in the *Münazarat* Nursi reveals his concern about involving common people in the constitutional order. He expresses his ideas in a language accessible to the masses and presents to his interlocutors tales and allegories that everyone could identify with.

As hinted at above, references will also be made to works on the topics of society and politics written by authoritative Nur students, among which Kazim Güleçyüz, Mehmet Kırkinci, Metin Karabaşoğlu, and Aladdin Başar. A particularly significant book – which functions almost as a reference text – is the one written by Safa Mürsel (1976) and entitled ‘Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and State Philosophy’ (*Bediüzzaman Said Nursi ve Devlet Felsefesi*). The book was ‘commissioned’ by community leaders who felt that the cemaat was missing a compendium to its founder’s political ideas, in an era – the 1970s – when different theories about the Islamic state were circulating in Turkey among Islamists (YNIst07).

Finally, I will make reference to a document titled ‘Wishes and Desires within the Framework of the Ideas of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi for the Development of a New Constitution’ (*Yeni Anayasa Sürecinde, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi’nin Görüşleri Çerçevesinde Talep ve Temenniler*), written by the Society of Young Jurists (*Genç Hukukçular Topluluğu*), an association belonging to the community, in collaboration with the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture, and presented to the Turkish Parliament in April 2012<sup>54</sup>. The report presents 24 points or ‘wishes’; each of them is supported by passages from the Risale and by extracts from the Constitutions of twenty (mostly Western) countries. One of the young jurists that participated in the writing of the Constitution draft, explained to me that they used the references to the Risale to make clear that their requests to the Parliament were driven from the thought of Said Nursi and that they used the references to other countries’ constitutions to show that these requests were ‘rational’ (YNIst20). I will rely on this document for the assessment of the meanings of democracy, freedom and justice because it presents concise definitions of these terms that are indicative of the ‘outside meaning’ of the community, that

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<sup>54</sup> In 2012 the JDP government, in prospect of the writing and promulgation of a new Turkish Constitution, instituted a ‘Commission for Constitution Negotiation’ (*Anayasa Uzlaşma Komisyonu*) composed of representatives of all the parties elected to Parliament, which had the role of guiding consultations on the issue of a new Constitution between the government on the one hand, and political parties and civil society organisations on the other. Several trade unions, business and associations and NGOs, among which foundations belonging to the Nur community, presented – formally or informally – their documents to the Commission. For details see the official website of the Turkish Parliament at: <http://yenianayasa.tbmm.gov.tr/default.aspx>.



is, the discourse aimed at the recognition in the public sphere of the community's ideas and actions. As the chapter will show, the discourse directed outside is adjusted to the parameters and categories of the secular tradition of state power, while the one aimed at the 'inside' is not. This does not necessarily mean that the two discourses are contradictory; they are simply constructed in different ways.

#### **4.2 Being human: the Islamic anthropology of the Risale**

Since in the Risale Said Nursi provide his followers with an overarching and holistic system of thought, a discussion on Nur students' socio-political views cannot but start with a reflection on their definition of personhood. Nursi regards man as a true and central being, placed into the world by God and innately endowed by Him with a limitless numbers of faculties to fulfil and realise the purpose of his existence therein. Man is first and foremost a self-conscious being and hence the subject of all ethical and moral concerns. In order to understand Nur students' vision of humankind, we need to follow Nursi's argumentation keeping in mind two questions that he poses in the Risale: 'What is the purpose of man on Earth?' and 'What are the distinguishing characteristics of man?'.

In the Risale the very essence of human beings is intrinsically connected to faith. Quoting the Quranic verse 'I created not jinn and mankind except that they might worship Me' (Q. 51:56), Mürsel argues that the purpose of sending man to this world and the wisdom implicit in it, consists in the fact that men recognise God as the Creator of all beings, believe in Him and worship Him. Then, the primordial duty of man in this world, where he is nothing but a traveller and a temporary guest, is that he would get to know God through Nature and the Creation, believe in Him and perform religious duties to thank Him. This means that men's aim in this world is to struggle to know God and live and administer the creation according to his commands (Mürsel, 1976: 60-67).

For Nur students, faith is not only the purpose of human beings in this world, but also their distinctive characteristic. To believe in God and to pray to Him is considered to be the 'natural' predisposition of humankind. Men, indeed, were created with the need to believe in a force that provides them with food and blessings and protects them against their enemies. In the Risale Nursi underlines the inexorability of the belief in God by comparing man's conscience to the laws of nature. When discussing that the essential nature of things does not

lie, Nursi argues that when a handful of water freezes, the inclination to expand that is present in its nature necessitates that it takes up more space. It expands even if it is in an iron container and it splits the container if necessary, since strong iron cannot prevent what the water's nature necessitates. Inclinations like this are the manifestations of the commands of God related to the creation (Mesnevi-yi Nuriye: 224-231). This means no creature can prevent the realisation of the attributes deposited in his essential nature by God.

Moreover, as faith is an integral part of humans' nature, religion is necessary for humankind's progress. As Nur students often recite, quoting Nursi, '*Iman insanı insan eder, belki sultan eder*' (The Words: 329), 'Faith makes humans humans or maybe sultans'. Thus if prophets had not brought religion to people, then people, despite their abilities, would have stayed at the level of animals. Thus is so because religion and faith are essential conditions for the full development of man's capabilities from a material and spiritual point of view (Mürsel, 1976: 67).

In the Risale the conscience is one of the means given – as a trust – to man by God to get to know Him. It is described as a place of transit where the 'world of the unseen' and the 'manifest world' we live in come together. The starting point of Nursi's analysis of man is the Quranic verse: 'We did indeed offer the Trust to the heavens, and the earths, and the mountains; but they refused to undertake it being afraid thereof. But man assumed it; indeed, he is most unjust, most foolish' (Q. 33:72). In the universe only man accepted the trust (*al-amānah*), intended as a charge or responsibility, which God had initially offered to the heavens, the earth and the mountains. All of them, in contrast with man, refused to take it, because of its enormous intrinsic burden. It is the assumption of the trust that makes man different from other creatures and makes him responsible for his acts, giving him his 'humanity'. The second part of the verse affirms that, of all the creatures, man is the most unjust and foolish. This claim refers to man's mistaken and improper use of the Trust. In the Risale, Nursi analyses both the nature and the functions of the trust given to man, and the errors that can arise from its use.

The characteristic that was given to man by way of trust and hence the characteristic that distinguishes him from the rest of the Creation is what Nursi calls the '*Ene*', literally the 'I'. Nursi writes: 'The key of the world is in the hand of man and is attached to his self. For while being apparently open, the doors of the universe are in fact closed. God Almighty has given to man by way of a trust such a key called the "I" that opens all the doors of the world; he has

given him an enigmatic “I” with which he may discover the hidden treasures of the Creator of the universe’ (The Words: 558). The ‘I’ – which can be understood as ‘conscience’, ‘conscious thought’ or ‘self’ – is a talisman-like key through which man is able to make sense of the Universe and, as a consequence, to know God. One of the inherent and imminent requirements of the trust is, indeed, that men recognise God.

But, why and how is the knowledge of God connected to the ‘I’? Bediüzzaman provides an answer: ‘The All-Wise Maker gave to man as a trust an “I” which comprises indications and samples that show and cause to recognize the truths of the attributes and functions of His dominicality, so that the “I” might be the unit of measurement of the attributes of dominicality and functions of Divinity might be known. However, it is not necessary for a unit of measurement to have actual existence; like hypothetical lines in geometry, a unit of measurement may be formed by hypothesis and suppositions’ (Said Nursi, The Words: 558). Here Said Nursi states two things: first, the ‘I’ is a unit of measurement that allows man to become aware of the attributes and functions of God’s Dominicality, and, second, this unit of measurement does not really exist.

Following his argumentation, we can understand in which way the ‘I’ is a unit of measurement of the names of God: ‘Since an absolute and all-encompassing thing [i.e., God] has no limits or end, neither may a shape be given to it, nor may a form be conferred on it, nor may it be determined; what its quiddity is may not be comprehended. For example, an endless light without darkness might not be known or perceived. But if a line of real or imaginary darkness is drawn, then it becomes known. Thus, since God’s Almighty attributes like knowledge and power and names like All-Wise and All-Compassionate are all-encompassing, limitless and without like, they might not be determined and what they are might not be known or perceived. Therefore, since they do not have limits or an actual end, it is necessary to draw a hypothetical and imaginary limit. The “I” does this, it imagines in itself a fictitious dominicality, ownership, power and knowledge: it draws a line. By doing this, it places an imaginary limit on the all-encompassing attributes, saying: “Up to here, mine, after that, His”; it makes a division. With the tiny units of measurement in itself, it slowly understands the true nature of the attributes’ (Said Nursi, The Words: 558).

During a *sohbet*, the reading of the above passage was followed by a simple – yet effective – explanation: ‘Thanks to the imagined dominicality over what he owns, man understands the dominicality of the Creator over the creation. Through his apparent ownership he understands

the true ownership of God. Thousands of attributes are known to the degree that all the Divine attributes are contained within the “I”. For example, man can think that, just as he is the owner of his house, so the Creator is the owner of the Universe; through his partial knowledge he understands the endless knowledge of God; or he might say: “As I made this house and arranged it, someone must have made the universe and arranged it”, and so on<sup>55</sup>. In other words, it is man’s own finitude that allows him to grasp the infinity and eternity of God. The ‘I’ makes him imagine that he possesses in a partial and limited way the attributes of God and through this act of imagination he understands the totality of God.

Another passage from the Risale argues that the two faculties, existing within the conscience, that make possible the comprehension of God and distinguish man from other beings, are reason and free will. It is through reason and free will that the conscience fulfils its duty. Nursi states: ‘Man is the most exalted among animals and the most important. For he discovers with his reason the steps between the apparent causes and effects existent in the universe, and the relationship of causes, which follow on after each other in succession. And, in order to imitate Divine art and orderly and wise dominical creation with his own insignificant art, and in order to understand Divine actions and Divine art through his partial knowledge and his own arts, he has been given the faculty of will as a scale and measure’ (The Damascus Sermon: 41). While further analysis of the reason and free will is to be found in the rest of the chapter, here it is sufficient to notice that both are faculties of the conscience and that they allow knowledge of God.

So far Bediüzzaman has described all the attributes of the ‘I’ as partial, supposed and unreal. He resumes this topic in the following passage: ‘The “I” is mirror-like, and, like a unit of measurement and a tool of discovery, it has an indicative meaning (*mana-i harfî*); having no meaning in itself, it shows the meaning of others. [...] Its dominicality is imaginary. Its existence is so weak and insubstantial that it cannot bear or support anything at all’ (Said Nursi, The Words: 559). Here the author refers to the distinction between the nominal meaning of things (*mana-i ismî*) and the indicative meaning (*mana-i harfî*). Things that have a nominal meaning do not signify anything other than themselves, whereas things that have an indicative meaning signify things other than themselves (see Chapter 3). As Nursi claims, everything that exists, except God, has an indicative meaning. That is to say, only God has

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<sup>55</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet* in Istanbul, March 2012.

real substance and everything in the universe, included the 'I', has to be seen as a representative, or a signifier, of God, and not as an agent meaningful in itself.

Understanding that the 'I' does not really possess the attributes it thinks it possesses, to the point that all of his power is imaginary, is extremely important for the true believer. Real knowledge of God requires, indeed, two steps: first, understanding the nature of God by way of comparison with the supposed features of the self; then, understanding that the traits of the self are purely imaginary and that God is the one and only possessor of attributes. If the second step is not fulfilled the 'I' ceases to be the instrument of knowledge of God, and starts to be the origin of sin.

A passage from the Risale read during a *sohbet* and its explanation make this point clear. The passage is the following: 'He who knows his own self in this way [as signifying something else, i.e. God] and acts according to it [...] truly carries out the Trust. [...] When the "I" fulfils his duty in this way, he abandons its imaginary dominicality and supposed ownership, which are the units of measurements and says: "He has the sovereignty and to Him is due all praise; He is the judgment and to Him will you all be brought back". [if it does that] It achieves true worship. It attains the rank of the "most excellent of patterns". But if, by forgetting the wisdom of its creation and abandoning the duty of its nature, the "I" views itself solely in the light of its nominal and apparent meaning, if it believes that it owns itself, then it betrays the Trust' (The Words: 559-560).

The woman that commented on Nursi's words after the reading, made use of a metaphor that was likely to be immediately grasped and easily remembered by a Muslim audience. She said: 'The "I" can lead to the radiant knowledge of God, if used properly, or to the biggest of sins, that of associating partners with God, if used improperly. From the time of Adam until now, the "I" has been the seed of the luminous tree of *Ṭūbā*, and, at the same time, of the terrible tree of *Zaqqum*<sup>56</sup>. If the "I" does not recognise that all the Power and all the Ownership belong to God and nothing belongs to itself, it gives rise to the habit of ascribing partners to God. This is very dangerous and this is why the heavens, earth and the mountains did not accept the trust; they were scared of *shirk* (idolatry)<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> According to the Quran, *Ṭūbā* is a tree that grows in heaven, whereas *Zaqqum* is a tree that is born out of the fires of hell.

<sup>57</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet*, March 2013.

The acknowledgement of God through the 'I' is necessarily accompanied by a formidable trial, which human beings have to undergo throughout their life. As Bilal Kuşpınar underlines, finding God, in Nursi's view, does not mean simply reaching the knowledge of Him and of His Existence. It means constantly keeping God and His Presence in mind. The moment man has accomplished such a high state of God-consciousness, he will have lived up to the requirement of his affirmative response to the Divine call. The state of God-consciousness implies also a man's full awareness of his own impotency and weakness and hence of his utmost need of God. Therefore, the true meaning of the trust is man's realisation of his own contingency (Kuşpınar, 1995: 4-5).

### 4.3 A critique to Materialist Philosophy

A significant part of the Risale is directed at the confutation of what Nursi calls 'materialist philosophy'. He does not attack any specific Muslim or non-Muslim philosophers or thinkers, but criticises the general category of materialist philosophy, which, in his writings, refers to every system of thought that claims to be able to make sense of the world purely on the basis of human beings' intellectual capacities, that is, without drawing upon Divine Revelation. Nursi places under the category of materialist philosophy the *Mu'tazila*<sup>58</sup>, the *kalam* (Islamic philosophy), and the secular-humanist philosophy. Throughout the Risale, he criticises the *Mu'tazila* for basing theology on reason and asserting that human judgment can be the final arbiter in distinguishing between right and wrong; some exponents of *kalam* for attributing to *imams*, who, in their thought should lead the state, the characteristics of the philosophers, and the secular-humanist philosophy for denying the role of Divine inspiration and prophethood in the development of humanity (Mürsel, 1976: 69-71; IndIst02).

Nursi sees a radical opposition between materialist philosophy and Quranic wisdom, considering the first as conducive to unbelief and misery and the second as a conducive to faith and happiness. He writes: 'In the world of humanity, from the time of Adam up to now, two great currents, two lines of thought, have always been and will so continue. [...] One of them is the line of prophethood and religion, the other the line of philosophy in its various forms. Whenever these two lines have been in agreement and united, that is to say, if the line of philosophy, having joined the line of religion, has been obedient and of service to it, the

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<sup>58</sup> The *Mu'tazila* is a school of theology based on reason and rational speculation that developed in the cities of Basra and Baghdad during the 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries.

world of humanity has experienced a brilliant happiness and social life. Whereas, when they have become separated, goodness and light have been drawn to the side of the line of prophethood and religion, and evil and misguidance to the side of the line of philosophy' (The Words: 561). Philosophy, then, can play a positive role in human history only if it follows the principles of prophethood and develops theories in line with religious truths.

Moreover, using the above-quoted metaphor of the trees of *Tuba* and *Zaqqum*, Nursi underlines how materialist philosophy and Quranic wisdom are the reflection of the two natures of the 'I' and the direct result of the proper or improper use men make of the trust. He writes: 'The line of philosophy that does not obey the line of religion, taking the form of a tree of *Zaqqum* scatters the darkness of ascribing partners to God and spreads misguidance on all sides. In the branch of the power of intellect it produces the fruit of atheism, Materialism and Naturalism for the consumption of the human intellect. And in the realm of the power and passion, it pours the tyrannies of *Nimrod*, *Pharaoh*, and *Shaddad*<sup>59</sup> on mankind. And in the realm of the power of animal appetites, it nurtures and bears the fruit of goddesses, idols and those who claim divinity. The origin of the tree of *Zaqqum*, together with that of the line of prophethood, which is like the *Tuba*-tree of worship, are in the two faces of the "I". The blessed branches of the line of prophethood [...] are the following: in the branch of the power of the intellect, it has nurtured the fruits of the prophets, the messengers, and the saints. In the branch of the power of repulsion, it has resulted in angelic kings and just rulers. And in the branch of the power of attraction, it has resulted in people of good character and modest and beautiful manner, both generous and gracious' (The Words: 561).

Here we can glimpse the link existing, in the architecture of the *Risale*, between the sphere of the self and the sphere of the political, which will be discussed throughout the chapter and will become clearer at the end of it. I am referring to the link that, passing through Quranic wisdom, connects the recognition of the impotence of man before God and the establishment of just governance among men. If the 'I' does not understand that he carries the meaning of God, that its existence is dependent from God, and its ownership is illusory, it gives rise to a form of philosophy which is disjointed from prophethood and which, in turn, creates the oppression of men over men. Thus, unbelief, tyranny and immorality on the one hand and faith, justice and morality on the other – produced respectively by Quranic wisdom and materialist philosophy – are all elements that cannot be separated from each other that is,

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<sup>59</sup> All three of them are figures mentioned in the Quran as despotic kings who oppressed their subjects and rebelled against God.

human societies cannot reach justice and morality if they do not have faith, and they will not encounter tyranny and immorality if they do not fall into disbelief.

After reconstructing the origins of the two lines of Quranic wisdom and materialist philosophy, Nursi engages with a critique of the latter from theological-logical, moral and social points of view. Hayri Bolay in a speech given at a symposium organised by the Yeni Nesil group summarised in six points Nursi's account of the theological and logical fallacies committed by materialist philosophy:

- 1) First, it disregarded the principle of Divine Unity, according to which, if a thing has a unity, it must proceed from only one. That is, since each thing and all things collectively have unity, they must be the creation of one single being. It substituted this Divine principle [that everything proceeds from God] with the principle that from one, only one thing proceeds. So, it claimed that everything in the universe proceeds from God by means of intermediaries. This equates to associating partners with God.
- 2) Second, by calling the Almighty God 'Self-Necessitating', it denied Him choice. It rejected the testimony of all creation, which proves that He has choice.
- 3) Third, it considered that knowledge is not concerned with insignificant matters and denied its comprehensiveness, and thus rejected the veracious witnessing of all beings.
- 4) Fourth, by attributing effects to causes, it has given Nature the power to create. 'Thus in the microcosm [the man] the "I" is the idol, whereas in the macrocosm [the universe] the idol is the Nature' (the Words: 567). People who follow the line of prophethood instead concluded that causes are only an apparent veil and nature is only the set of rule of God's creation, a collection of His laws and the way in which he demonstrates his power.
- 5) Fifth, it assumed the human intellect to be self-sufficient.
- 6) Sixth, it did not find the door of the hereafter and therefore denied the resurrection of the bodies and ascribed pre-eternity to souls (Hayri Bolay, 1995: 7-9).

Among Nursi's claims against materialist philosophy, the one that is based on the movement of atoms is particularly well known among the readers of the Risale and particularly effective in convincing them of the righteousness of Nursi's position. The argument is part of the accusation directed at philosophy of attributing causes to effects. In his reasoning, Nursi departs from the following Quranic verse: 'And yet, the unbelievers asserts, "Never will the Hour come upon us!". Say: "Nay! But most surely, by my Sustainer, it will come upon you –



by Him who knows the Unseen – from Whom is not hidden the least little atom in the heavens or on the earth, nor is there anything less than that, or greater, but it is in the Clear Book” (Q. 34:3). He then goes on to argue that the Materialists, whose use of reason is limited to what is immediately apparent to them, have taken the transformation of particles, which they regard as the result of coincidence, as the fundamental principle of all the laws of nature. Thus they have rejected God, denying Him power and will. According to Nursi, in every atom, there are two truthful signs of the existence of God. First, since the particles’ duties are endless and extremely complicated, they demonstrate that they act at the command of God and in His Name. If every particle does not act with God’s permission and under His authority, we must assume that every particle must have infinite knowledge and limitless power and this is against logic. Second, the fact the particles conform to the universal order of the cosmos and enter each place without obstacles shows that they act through the power and wisdom of God. Again, thinking that the particles would have by themselves knowledge of the order of the world would be absurd. Moreover, the fact that particles can enter everything in the universe cannot be a sign that they own everything in the universe. It is rather the case that whoever owns the particles [i.e. God], must own also all the places they enter in (The Words: 570-576).

When passages from the Risale dealing with the movement of particles were read during a *sohbet*, the following comment was added to the text: ‘If the stones of the dome of Aya Sophia<sup>60</sup> are not dependent on the command and skill of its architect, all the stone must have skills in the art of building, and must be either subject to or dominant over the rest of the stones. They must decide by themselves and have the power to stand shoulder to shoulder in order not to fall and collapse. In the same way, if the particles in creatures, which are thousands of times more skilfully fashioned than the stones of the dome of Aya Sophia, are not dependent on the command of the master builder of the universe, then to each of them there must be ascribed the attributes of the universe’s Maker. Would that seem logical to any reasonable man? [...] Understanding that nothing in nature works without the command and the will of God saves us from the risk of associating partners with God, against which the Quran continuously warns us. With the will and assistance of God we will not fall in error like philosophers throughout the ages did’<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>60</sup> Or Hagia Sophia, an historical mosque in Istanbul.

<sup>61</sup> A *sohbet* in Istanbul, May 2013. A similar metaphor can be found in The Words: 577-578.

Besides using theological and logical arguments Nursi claims that philosophy separated from prophethood, by destroying morality, has had negative consequences at both the individual and societal level. With regard to the individual, philosophy has encouraged man to become a self-centred seeker of benefits, who pursues only his personal interest. With regard to society, instead, it has made acceptable principles like ‘all power to the strongest’, ‘the winner takes all’ and ‘in power there is right’, to legitimise the power of men over men. Due to this understanding, philosophy has denied the principles of the line of prophethood, which are those of mutual assistance, generosity, and freedom, and has given moral support to both egoism and tyranny (Hayri Bolay, 1995).

#### **4.4 Reason and Rationality**

In his work, Nursi mentions several times the value of reason and the importance of using it. He simultaneously lays a great emphasis on the necessity of harmoniously combining the intellect and the heart in the light of faith. In this respect, he writes: ‘We, Muslims, who are students of the Quran follow proofs (*ispat*); we approach the truths of belief through reason, thought, and our hearts. We do not abandon proof in favor of blind obedience and imitation of the clergy, like some adherents of other religions. Therefore, in the future, when reason, science and technology prevail, of a certainty that will be the time the Quran will gain ascendancy, which relies on rational proofs and invites the reason to confirm its pronouncements’ (The Damascus Sermon: 32). In this passage four themes of the Risale are outlined: the rationality of Islam; the possibility of finding proofs to religious truths; the rejection of blind imitation in matters of faith; and the certainty of the future supremacy of Islam.

While the community, as underlined in the first chapter, equates rationality to modernity when presenting an image of itself to the outside world, it gives rationality a different meaning when addressing inside members. During sohbet it is often underlined that Islam is a rational religion. In this context, though, rationality is not intended in a sociological sense, but in a theological sense. Islam is rational because, contrary to other religions, it does not ask the believer to accept truths that are not logical. In Islam, faith and reason are values that do not contradict each other; they cannot be separated because faith is a choice that needs to be made by using reason. Rationality, thus, means to be able to ‘believe with both the heart and the mind’ (*akıl ve kalpla inanmak*). As a consequence, rationality is not connected to

modernity, but to the theological concept of Islam as a ‘natural religion’ (*al-din al-fitrah*), according to which *fitrah* (nature) is the natural inclination or pattern on which Allah has created humankind and Islam advocates beliefs and behaviours that are in perfect harmony with it.

For Nur students the rationality of Nursi’s explanations is a crucial factor in the strengthening of their faith and one of the main reasons why they decided to join the community. Some passages from an interview with Meryem Weld<sup>62</sup>, published by the Yeni Nesil group, exemplify well this point. She declared: ‘I found that the Risale-i Nur not only addressed and satisfied my intellect, but also as the layers of the dirt of unbelief were peeled away, it addressed my heart and inner senses. [...] Also unique and of utmost importance is the fact that Beddiuzzaman Said Nursi wrote the Risale-i Nur specifically to answer the doubts and confusions caused by atheist, naturalist and materialist philosophies, and to demonstrate through logical arguments and proofs their irrationality and absurdity, and to show that the only logical, rational explanation of the universe and man is that revealed by its Single and Unique creator’ (Weld, 2005: 15-18).

A significant share of the Risale is dedicated to what are claimed to be rational proofs (*ispatlar*) of the existence and unity of God, prophethood, the resurrections of the bodies in the hereafter, the existence of angels and Divine Destiny. These proofs are expressed in the form of metaphors, comparisons, and parables. Nursi himself explains that the reason behind his figurative and anecdotic style of writing is to facilitate comprehension and to show how rational, appropriate, well founded and coherent are the truths of Islam. He adds that the meaning of the stories he recounts is contained in the explanations that conclude them and that each story is an allusion pointing to a concluding truth. Therefore, his tales and metaphors are not to be considered as mere rhetorical devices, but as veritable truths (The Words: 59).

As Yusuf Sevki Yavuz underlines, one may summarise Nursi’s proofs of God’s existence under four headings. The first is the proof of man’s inborn nature: the fact that throughout history men have believed in the existence of a God and have constantly searched for an elevated Being in whom they could take refuge, demonstrates that the need to believe in God is an innate sense, and this sense demonstrates the existence of a Creator who brought them into being. The second is the proof of creation: the fact that all the beings in the universe

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<sup>62</sup> A British citizen who converted to Islam thanks to the Risale, also mentioned in Chapter 3.

undergo constant change show that they are not pre-eternal, but created in time. The third is the proof of contingency: the fact that out of innumerable alternatives in regard to essence and attributes, all the beings in the universe possess only specific, appropriate attributes shows that they are contingent, and hence created. The fourth is the proof of order: the order present in the universe as a whole and in all its parts indicates the Being who set them in order. Similarly, the wise and purposeful beauty of all things points clearly to the Being who created them (Yavuz, 1995: 3-4).

It goes beyond the purpose of this study to analyse every piece of evidence that Said Nursi adduces to the fundamental principles of Islamic belief. For this reason, I will restrict the discussion to a couple of examples, choosing among the proofs that have a stronger hold on Nur students and that they quote more often. In order to demonstrate the existence of God, Nursi writes: ‘A book, particularly one in each word of which a minute pen has inscribed another whole book, and in each letter of which a fine pen has traced a poem, cannot be without a writer; this would be entirely impossible. So this cosmos cannot be without its inscriber; this is impossible to the utmost degree. For the cosmos is precisely such a book that each of its pages includes many other books, each of its words contains a book, and each of its letter contains a poem. [...] Similarly, a house cannot arise without a builder, particularly a house adorned with miraculous works of art, wondrous designs and amazing ornaments. No intelligence will accept that [such a house] could arise without a builder; definitively it needs a master architect. [...] In like manner, the cosmos also requires an infinitely wise, all-knowing and all-powerful Maker’ (Said Nursi, *The Words*: 70-71).

One of my interviewees resorted to this argument when expounding to me the existence of God. He explained: ‘There are thousands of proofs of the existence of God, whereas the non-existence of God cannot be proved. Let us suppose that the universe is this room where you and I are sitting. If I want to find God, all I have to do is look at an object in the room – let us say, this table – and see in it the Divine presence. Indeed, the fact that the table exists means that it was made, and, since it was made there must be someone who made it. That someone must be God. Although I could replicate this proof with all the other objects of the room, looking at one single object is enough. In other words, I can look at the table and say: “Here is God”. Because, as Bediüzzaman says, “if there is something that was made, there must be a maker” (*fiil varsa, fa’il var*). If, instead, I want to prove that God does not exist, I have to look at the table and prove that God is not there; then I have look at the pen and prove that God is not there; then I have to look at the chair and prove that God is not there, and so on for all the

objects of the room. Now, considering that the universe is infinitely bigger than this room, would that be possible?' (YAIst07).

In another, frequently read passage of the Risale, in order to explain the Quranic verse 'The command of the hour of resurrection will be like the glance of the eye' (Q. 16:77), Nursi argues in the following manner: 'The verse shows that the resurrection of the dead and Great Gathering will occur instantaneously, in a flash. But man's narrow intellects require some tangible parable to enable us to accept and assent to this infinitely miraculous and unparalleled statement. It [the resurrection] consists of three matters. Regarding the first matter, an example for the return of spirits to their bodies is the following: the soldiers of a highly disciplined army, having dispersed in all directions in order to rest, are summoned together with a loud re-echoing blast on the trumpet. Now the Sur, the trumpet of *Isrāfīl*<sup>63</sup>, is certainly no less powerful than that army's trumpet, and the spirits of men [...] are more obedient, disciplined and submissive than the soldiers in the army. [...] Regarding the second matter, an example for the reanimation of bodies is the following: just as in a great city, on a festive night, a hundred thousand lamps may be lit from a single power station, in a single instant, without the apparent passage of any time, so too it is possible to switch on a hundred million electric lamps all over the globe from a single power station. If a creation of God Almighty such as electricity [...] can manifest this property [...] then resurrection may also take place in a fraction of a second. Regarding the third matter an example for the instant resurrection of bodies is the perfect remaking within a few days of all the trees in the spring, which are far more numerous than all humanity, together with all their leaves, in exactly the same way as those of the previous spring' (The Words: 125-126).

During a *sohbet* when this passage was read, as usual, a comment complemented the text: 'Look at how beautifully argued the resurrection of the bodies is. When we look at trees during the winter, do we not have the impression that their naked branches will never return to life? And yet, when spring comes, is it not the case that those lifeless skeletons are covered by thriving green leaves? Are not we witnesses of this miracle every year? In the same way our dead body will be invigorated with new life in the hereafter, even if that seems impossible at the time of death. Moreover, the resurrection will be faster than a fraction of second, as our Master skilfully proves with the example of the soldier and with the example of the light. Why is that? Because, as Nursi reminds us, this world is the world of wisdom and requires

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<sup>63</sup> *Isrāfīl* is the angel that, according to the Quranic tradition, will play the trumpet to announce the Day of the Resurrection.

that creation happens slowly. In the hereafter, instead, power and mercy will be manifested more than wisdom, there will be no need for time, and things will be made instantaneously. [...] When you read these words and Nursi's argumentation, it is impossible not to be convinced of the existence of life in the hereafter. No rational human being would disagree with that'<sup>64</sup>.

While Nursi's proofs are considered perfectly in line with human rationality, arguments that reject the existence of God and that deny the role God has in the occurrence of natural phenomena are deemed ill-formulated and completely illogical. In a paper presented at one of the symposium on Said Nursi, Yamina Mermer addresses this theme and, drawing on the Risale, points out the inconsistency of scientific or philosophical reasoning that does not consider God as the primary cause of the universe. The paper is, in fact, a critique (and a rejection), from an Islamic point of view, of Western rationality with its post-Cartesian style of knowledge production. The following extract from the text helps to clarify my point: 'Scientists have never at any time or in any way been able to prove that causes have a true effect. [...] materialist scientists say that causes like sunlight, water and air, are effective factors in the formation of nutrients. And to "prove" this they deprive a plant of water or sunlight and demonstrate that it withers up and dies; that is, that photosynthesis is not carried out, and therefore nutrients not produced. Thus, they say, *if there is no* water or light, the nutrients are not produced. And going on from this "if there is no" they reach the conclusion that "water or sunlight produces the nutrients". They suppose that in this way they have proved their thesis. If it is noted carefully, it is seen that this is a negative approach; it is not a proof. On pressing the on/off button on a television, a picture appears on the screen. [...] According to the logic of the negative approach of materialist scientists, "the button makes the picture appear on the screen". And the "proof" of this is that the picture does not appear when the button is not pressed. They do not think that the broadcasting is done outside, and it is not the button that does it. The button is merely part of the order of the television equipment. [...] What logic is there if someone was to tell you: "If you do not accept that the button produces the picture, make the picture appear without pressing it"? [...] The fact that the result is not achieved when one of the causes is missing can in no way be proof that the cause in question had the effect. At most, it is evidence that a particular cause and a particular effect are made *together*. This is proof that the relationship between cause and effect is

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<sup>64</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet* in Istanbul, April 2012.

established within an *order*. [...] The Quran does not say that God creates without causes. [...] It says that it is God that creates both cause and effect' (Mermer, 1995: 5-6).

Since Nur students find Nursi's argumentations wholly convincing, they make his reasoning the cornerstone of their proselytising activities, with the firm belief that the mind and the heart of anybody who is introduced to Nursi's proofs will be opened to the Quranic truths. They also claim that, being the modern age the age of rationality (intended as Islamic rationality) and scientific discovery, the principles of the Quran are capable, today more than ever, of conquering people and bringing them to Islam. Moreover, since so much of Risale is devoted to providing evidence for religious truths, belief (*iman*) for those who follow the method of Said Nursi becomes a vital, ongoing process, progressing through increasingly higher degrees of certainty.

Nur students call this type of belief '*imân-i tahkikî*', which can be translated as 'confirmatory belief' or 'belief ascertained through enquiry' and oppose it to '*taqlîdî imân*' that is, 'imitative belief' or 'belief through blind imitation or habit'. Community members who were already practicing Muslims when they started reading the Risale often underline that thanks to Nursi's writings their faith turned from imitative belief into confirmatory belief. They explain that, before joining the community, they were practicing Islam in the way they had learnt from their families or in the mosque without asking many questions of themselves; the encounter with the Risale had opened for them a new horizon of thought, thanks to which they learnt to ask questions and find answers and reached higher levels of consciousness and confidence as believers.

One evening, during an informal after-dinner conversation in a derslane in Van, a young female student who had experienced this passage from imitative to confirmatory belief, told me the following story to explain to me how highly valuable the newly acquired faith was: 'One day a man and his companion were walking through a forest on their way to the city. When they encountered mud on the trail, the man took off his cape and laid it on the mud, and then he walked on the cape with his boots. Surprised at such behaviour, his companion asked him why he would prefer to have his cape dirty rather than his boots. The man replied: "I have inherited the cape from my father, who had inherited it from his father. The boots, instead, I have bought with the money that I gained thanks to the sweat of my work, so they are infinitively more precious to me". The cape is the imitative belief that we all learned from

our family, whereas the boots represent the confirmatory belief that we struggle every day to achieve’.

#### 4.5 Free will and Divine Destiny

Nursi presents an interpretation of the Quran that combines free will and Divine Destiny. According to him, Divine Wisdom and Divine Justice demand that men possess free will so that they may be rewarded or punished for their acts. Human free will does not contradict Divine Destiny; rather, Destiny confirms the existence of human free will. It is so because Divine destiny is in some respects identical to Divine Knowledge, which contains the events occurred in all times (present, past and future); knowledge is dependent on the things known and the things known are the actions men choose to perform.

In putting forward his theory of Destiny, Nursi argues against both the *Mu‘tazila*’s theory that the individual is completely free and completely responsible for his present and future actions and the *Jabrīya*’s theory that people have no free will to act according to the scenario Allah has written for them<sup>65</sup>. Nursi maintains that God gave people free will, but this free will is not sufficient to generate results. Only God can create actions, hence it is God that creates people’s actions. Nevertheless, Allah made the creation of actions dependent on the will of his servants. This means that people, on the one hand, cannot claim to be the author of their deeds, since they do not have the power to create actions, and on the other hand they cannot think they are not responsible for their deeds, because it only through their will that God creates the actions they perform.

During a lesson, the critiques of *Mu‘tazila* and *Jabrīya* were expressed by dwelling on the argument that God creates causes and effects together: ‘From the point of view of Destiny, cause and effect cannot be separated. This means that a certain cause is destined to produce a certain effect. For example, it cannot be argued that killing someone with a gun is acceptable because the victim was destined to die at that time and would have died even if he or she had

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<sup>65</sup> The *Jabrīya* (the pre-determinists), also known as *Murji’a* (those who postpone the judgment of people until the Last day) is a school of thought within the Islamic tradition that emerged in the 8<sup>th</sup> century when the first theological debate – does a Muslim who commits a grave sin remain a Muslim? – was raised in Islam. Maintaining that ‘decisions belong to God alone’, the *Jabrīya* argued that the judgment on the sinner-Muslim should be postponed to the hereafter and that possession of faith alone was sufficient for a person to be defined as Muslim. During the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750), however, the idea that ‘Decisions belong to God alone’ came to mean that political power, seen as having been established by God’s will, ought not to be disobeyed. The *Mu‘tazila* (the neutralists) was born as a reaction to the deterministic interpretation of Islam by the *Jabrīya* and regarded man as responsible for his actions (Rahman, 2002: 86-89).



not been shot. Such an argument is baseless, for the victim is actually destined to die as a result of being shot. The argument that he or she would have died even without being shot means that the victim would have died without a cause and this is also unthinkable. There are not two kinds of destiny, one for the cause and one for the effect. Destiny is one. Deceived by such a paradox, the *Mu'tazila* concluded that the victim would not have died if he or she had not been shot – forgetting that it was the victim's destiny to be shot to death – while the *Jabrīya* argued that he or she would have died even without being shot [thus ignoring the cause]. Both of these schools of thought are wrong. The correct view is the following: we do not know whether or not the victim would have died if he or she had not been shot'<sup>66</sup>.

Once established that men have a degree of free will that does not contradict destiny, Nursi goes on to define the character of this free will. He maintains that men have two different kinds of will: the 'potential will' (*küllî irade*, literally general will) and the 'actual will' (*cüz'-i irade*, literally partial will). Potential will is the will existing in a person before that person starts performing an action. A person then can have a potential will to read, write, or walk. Potential will turns into actual will at the moment a person chooses among the many possible actions he could perform and starts reading, writing or walking. Actual will, then, represents the transformation of intentions into actions.

The use of the word *cüz*, which literally means fragment or particle, to describe actual will is aimed at underlining the infinitively small nature of human will in comparison to God's infinite power and will. This partial or actual will is too small and too insignificant to have any part and merit in the performance of good acts and at the same time is independent enough from the will of God to be held responsible for bad acts. As Mehmet Kırkinci underlines, a person cannot boast his good actions, because God created him to perform those actions, just like the bee cannot be proud of its honey and the silkworm cannot be proud of its silk because God designed and created them for producing honey and silk. Instead, a person that commits bad deeds is responsible for his sins because he uses his actual will to rebel against God and perform an action he was not created for (Kırkinci, 2003: 34-38). Put differently, men are completely responsible for their sins for only they, as individuals, can will and then commit them. On the other hand, they have no right to boast about their good acts, since they only have a very small share in them; it is Divine Compassion that demands good acts and it is Divine Power that creates them.

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<sup>66</sup> A Meşveret *sohbet* in Isparta, March 2013.

In this understanding of Destiny the different features of the 'I' play an important role. Nursi writes: '[The "I"] has two faces. The first of these faces look towards good and existence. With this face it is only capable of receiving favours; it accepts what is given, itself it cannot create. This face is not active, it has not the ability to create. Its other face looks towards evil and goes to non-existence. That face is active, it has the power to act' (Said Nursi, *The Words*: 559). The face of the 'I' that looks towards good represents the inclination of the soul to act according to the will of God. This face is not active in the sense that it cannot do much more than accept the good actions that God had created. The face of the 'I' that looks towards evil represents instead the inclination of the soul to act contrary to the will of God. This face is active in the sense that it has the power to choose actions men were not created for.

Nursi's view of destiny leads to the behavioural principle 'Do not be proud of your good actions, take responsibility for your sins', which for Nur students is the correct interpretation of the Quranic line 'Whatever good visits you is from God; whatever evil befalls you is from yourself' (Q. 4:79). This means that men can ascribe positive things only to God and can ascribe negative things only to themselves. While it is admissible to relate some misfortune to Divine destiny, so as not to despair during a loss, a calamity, or a disease, people cannot be absolved from their sins and exempted from their religious obligations by attributing every event of their life to destiny. On the one hand, Divine Destiny exists so that believers do not attribute their good acts to themselves and thereby become proud; on the other hand, free will was given to men so that their rebellious souls do not rid themselves of their sins' consequences by attributing them to destiny. In short, belief in destiny is a principle of faith that preserves men from self-conceit, while human free will is recognised as the ground of men's sins (*The Twenty Sixth Word*; Kirkinci, 2003).

These ideas were supported during a lesson in the following way: 'Although our free will cannot cause something to happen, Almighty God uses it [our free will] to bring His universal will into effect and to guide us in whatever direction we wish. As a result, we are responsible for our choice's consequences. For example, if a child riding on your shoulder asks you to take him up a high mountain, and you do so, he might catch a cold. If he gets sick, how could he blame you for that cold, as he was the one who asked to go there? In fact, you might even punish him because of his choice. In a like manner, the Almighty God, never coerces his servants into doing something, and so has made His Will somewhat dependent on our free will. In sum, we have a degree of free will because we are human beings. Although it is so

limited that it makes almost no contribution to our good acts, it can cause deadly sins and destruction’<sup>67</sup>.

Regarding the creation of actions, Nursi himself poses a question in the Risale: ‘Since God creates all actions, when he creates an evil action is he creating evil?’. The answer was addressed in a *sohbet*: ‘We will and commit our sins and God creates our acts as a requirement of a law he established for the universe. Although we derive great benefits from rain, some people in some circumstances can be harmed by it. And yet, those who are harmed by rain cannot deny that it contains God’s grace for all people. Even in the events that appear to be harmful there is Divine Wisdom. Based on this subtle reality, willing and committing evil deeds is evil, whereas creating them is not’<sup>68</sup>. Then, the creation by God of the evil deeds that men choose to perform is not in itself evil because of the necessity of those deeds, which might not appear clearly to men but it is certainly contained in Divine Wisdom.

Finally, regarding the connection between justice and destiny, Nur students maintain that, as Divine Destiny is absolutely free of evil and ugliness in relation to results, it is also exempt from injustices on account of causes; Divine destiny always considers the primary cause, not the apparent, secondary cause, and always does justice. In our evaluation of the events of this world, we judge according to apparent causes and draw the wrong conclusions. For example, a court may imprison an innocent person for theft. However, Divine destiny actually passes this judgment because of that person’s real crime, such as murder, that has remained unknown. So, while the court unjustly jailed this person for a crime he or she did not commit, Divine destiny justly punished that person for his or her secret crime (Kırkıncı, 2003: 61-80).

#### **4.6 Individuality, the cult of the self and the ethical training of the soul**

To ‘renounce to the cult of the self’ (*enaniyeti terk etmek*) is the cornerstone of the Nurcus’ ethics and a fundamental step in the training of the soul. *Enaniyet* (literarily, egoism), which I translate as ‘cult of the self’, is a feeling which was given to men by God, but which needs to be abandoned. This is how this topic was addressed during a lesson: ‘*Enaniyet* is the feeling of being in charge of ourselves. In our daily life when we breath, walk or move our arms, when we taste the delicious food Allah has provided us with, we think that we actually have

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<sup>67</sup> A Meşveret *sohbet* in Izmit, February 2013.

<sup>68</sup> A Meşveret *sohbet* in Isparta, March 2013.

the power to do all of these actions. Then, a microscopic microbe, which is infinitively smaller than us, makes us sick. We have trouble breathing, walking becomes hard, we cannot even lift our arms and the food that previously seemed so sweet now nauseates us. While before we thought we were strong and potent, now we see how weak and needy we are. So we understand that we do not have power over our own actions; we see that it is God that makes us breath, walk, move or enjoy his bounties. We do not belong to ourselves, we belong to Allah; we are not the masters of ourselves, we are the slaves of Allah. Only if we abandon the cult of ourselves, and recognise that all the power belongs to Allah, are we able to become true slaves of God [hence true Muslims]<sup>69</sup>.

While the Risale invite the followers to abandon the cult of the self, it encourages them to nurture their individuality (*ferdiyet*). In the words of Metin Karabaşoğlu: ‘The cult of the self is considering things that are God’s possession as belonging to yourself. It is thinking that you are independent from God. After you recognize that the entire cosmos belong to Allah, that all the people are His slaves and that you, as well, were created by God, you can recognize that God created you different from anybody else. This awareness is individuality. You have to know that your face features, your fingerprints, your intellectual and spiritual capacities are unique. Allah does not waste anything; He would not have created you if you had to be the copy of somebody else. For this reason, you need to carry all the characteristics that were donated to you, and you need to remember that nobody can impose his way on you, because you were created different. While at vertical level [in the relationship between God and the believer] there cannot be independence, since we are all slaves of God, at vertical level [in the relationships among people], there must be independence and freedom. This means that we have to renounce to the cult of the self without losing our individuality’ (IndIst02).

Another interviewee expressed the same ideas: ‘Since God created each person with his/her distinctive individuality, it is necessary that each person develops his/her ability at an optimum level. It is important, nevertheless, not to feel arrogantly proud of these skills and not to appropriate them for oneself, despite the fact that they were given by God. If this happens, people switch from genuine and sincere individuality to the cult of the self, which leads to looking at other people with superiority and taking advantage of them’ (YAIst02). Both these extracts from interviews point to two central themes of the Risale. The first is the need to find a balanced approach to the self that would nurture uniqueness and personal

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<sup>69</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet* in Istanbul, May 2012.

dispositions without relapsing into self-centeredness and self-absorption. This equilibrium can be achieved only through the constant training of the soul, in a perpetual recognition of men's finitude before God's omnipotence. The second theme is the connection existing between the discovery of a balanced self and the establishment of relationships of equality and respect among men. Only if men are true slaves of God, that is, if they form with Him a bond on the basis of their impotency, can they interact with each other without prevailing on each other.

#### **4.7 The meaning of shari'a**

For Nur students, shari'a is the system of principles that sanctions every voluntary action of men, the corpus of Divine law that orders every aspect of human life, from the psychology of the individual to the organisation of the family, from politics to economics. It is then a totality that does not separate religion and state; it is the unity of religion, ethics and politics that dictates the way governments have to act (Mürsel, 1976: 370). Within this totality, though, ninety nine per cent of shari'a is about ethics, religious duties, the hereafter and virtue, while only one per cent is about politics (Divan-i Harb-i Örfi: 127), with the word 'politics' referring to the organisation of the state and not to daily political affairs (Güleçyüz, 2011: 89).

Furthermore, shari'a is a totality because it includes not only men's rules for every aspect of life, but also the laws of nature. There are indeed two kinds of shari'a. The first is composed of the laws that regulate the natural world; the second is composed of the laws that regulate the relationship between men and God and the relationships among men. Since both kinds of shari'a have the same source (i.e. Allah), they complement each other. It is important, then, that the laws among men are in harmony with the laws of nature (Güleçyüz, 2011: 92-93). This view of shari'a as comprising the rules of physics and chemistry and the call for congruence between natural principles and human regulations is in line with the notion, discussed in the previous chapter, that both the Quran and the Universe are books written by God to guide men. As a consequence, when Nur students claim that the relationships among men have to be congruent to the principles of shari'a, they do not just mean that these interactions have to follow Divine provisions as codified by the *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), but also that they have to reflect the functioning of the universe.

Said Nursi underlines that, since the Divine law has come from the timeless and perpetual word of God, it is valid for the eternity. For this reason it is dynamic: it adapts and expands in

relation to man's development (Hurriyet'e Hitab in Asar-i Bediyye: 347). While the law of nature are created in the most perfect way, the laws among men have different functions. Some of them are soundly established and are purely good. Others are provisory and can be modified. Temporary laws are the rules in force after humanity escapes from a period of ferociousness and oppression (i.e.: the period before the revelation of Islam) and before it reaches the beauty of perfect justice. The laws represent the lesser evil (*ehvren-i şer*) and relative justice (*adalet-i izafiye*). Here Bediüzzaman refers specifically to the provisions of shari'a that allow a man to marry four women and that make permissible to have slaves. These laws are steps towards perfect justice (*adalet-i mazha*) because, before they were established, men were allowed to have as many wives as they wanted and slaves were treated very inhumanly and were not granted any possibility of freeing themselves. However, they are not yet in line with perfect justice, which requires that a man has just one wife and that every human being is born free (Mürsel, 1976: 372-373).

Besides the need to adjust the rules on polygamy and slavery to modern times, Said Nursi, and hence Nur students, claim that shari'a law is the most suitable jurisdiction to guide contemporary societies. One day, after a sohbet, I engaged in a conversation with a group of women who were arguing for the integration of shari'a regulations into the Turkish penal and civil codes. When I asked if they were in favour of the physical punishments required by some of the shari'a provisions, one of the women took a book from The Risale Collection displayed on one of the shelves of the room where we were sitting and started reading: 'One time in the desert a man was a guest of a nomad who was one of the people of reality. He saw that the desert dwellers did not concern themselves with guarding their belongings. His host had even left some money openly in the corner of the room. The guest asked him: "Aren't you afraid of thieves, just throwing your belongings in the corner like that?" His host answered: "We do not have any thieves here". The guest said: "We put our money in safes and lock them, but it is still frequently stolen". His host told him: "We cut off the hands of thieves as a Divine command and on account of the justice of the shari'a". Whereupon the guest exclaimed: "Then most of you must be lacking a hand!" His host told him: "I am fifty years old, and yet, in my own life, I have only seen one person with his hand cut off". The guest was ashamed and said: "Although every day in my country we put fifty people in prison for theft, it does not have one hundredth of the effectiveness of your justice here". The host said: "You have been unmindful of an important truth and have ignored a strange and powerful fact, as a result of which true justice has escaped you." [...] The truth is as follows: With us,

the moment a thief stretches out his hand to seize another's property, he recalls the punishment of the shari'a. The command revealed from the Divine Throne comes to his mind. Through the sense of belief and the ear of the heart, he hears the verse: "As to the thief, male or female, cut off his or her hands" [Q. 5:38]. [...] The inclination [to steal] which arises from the instinctual soul and lust, is stifled and recedes; by degrees it is completely extinguished. [...] Yes, the belief places in the heart and mind a permanent "prohibitor"; when sinful desire emerge from the soul, it repulses them, declaring: It is forbidden!' (The Damascus Sermon: 68-69).

After reading the passage, the woman closed the book, looked at me, and, pointing out the senselessness of my Western-minded question, asked: 'Do you understand the matter? If there is shari'a, there will be no crime and hence no violence. Once Divine Law is implemented, there will be no need to actually cut hands off, or to stone people'. This anecdote highlights two aspects of Nur students' worldview. First, according to them, shari'a is more effective than secular law. This is because it has the power to awaken in the soul of the person who is about to commit a crime the fear of Divine Punishment, power that the secular law lacks. Second, the implementation of shari'a is associated with the birth of a utopian, virtuous society, whose impeccable piety will make the very enforcement of shari'a punishment unnecessary. It is, in other words, a view that denies the existence of any form of physical violence in the shari'a-based state and society, not by principle, but as a matter of practical outcome.

#### **4.8 Freedom**

In Nur students' socio-political imaginary freedom is a principle that necessarily stems from faith. In their view, there is a strong connection between faith, the abandonment of *enaniyet* and freedom. Here is an extract from a Münazarat lesson that makes clear this connection: 'Why do the Risale always remind us that we have to abandon the cult of the self? Because only if we get rid of it can we really be free. A person who accepts that there is only one God in the entire universe, who believes in Him and is tied to Him, cannot submit (*boyunu eğemez*) to anybody in this world. He cannot put up with anybody's orders. His faith does not allow for that because the only one who can give him commands is God, the Creator of the universe. He cannot see another person as God and nobody can act against him as a dictator.

For the same reason, he cannot dominate anybody in this world and cannot oppress or subjugate those who are weak'<sup>70</sup>.

In the same vein, an interviewee underlined how faith gives rise to freedom and how freedom makes sure that no tyranny is established in society: 'In the M nazarat Said Nursi says "The more faith is perfect, the more freedom is bright" (*iman ne kadar m kemm l olursa, h rriyet o kadar parlar*) (M nazarat: 144). Here he explains two characteristics of faith. The first is * hamet* (courage). The believer, with the courage that comes to him from faith, stands against all the dictators and the oppressors. He receives strength from the firm conviction that God gave him freedom when he was born. The other characteristic of faith is * fkat* (affection, compassion). Out of compassion, he cannot smash anybody, not even an ant because the ant is free as well. So, the principle the believer has to follow is courage toward those above him and compassion with those below him (* ste kar    hamet, alta kar    fkat*). Nobody can usurp his freedom and rights because they were given to him when he was born and he cannot usurp anybody's freedom and rights because Allah commands him not to harm anybody, not even animals' (YAIst01).

The Constitution draft presented by the Yeni Nesil group to the Turkish Parliament, indirectly recalling this theme of equal relationships among men as a requirement of faith, combines a reference to the Quranic injunction directed at men against considering each other gods (and hence submitting to each other), with an appeal to universal principles, in order to ask for a form of freedom that unfolds under the shield of the superiority of the (secular) law. The text states the following: 'The Constitution protects the fundamental rights and freedoms which are based on universal principles. Civilization serves the advancement and maturation of the humanity and the fulfilment of its true nature. From this point of view, being against civilization equates to being against humanity. Maybe freedom is this: nobody should dominate anybody outside the justice of the law. Everybody should be protected by the law; everybody should be free to take actions that fall in the realm of legality. The secret of the verse "O People of the Scripture do not take one other as lords instead of Allah" (Q. 3:64) should be disclosed. The widest form of freedom is the Republic' (Talep ve Temmeniler, 2012: 4).

If freedom is a natural outcome of faith, then the guideline for its definition and limitation are provided by faith itself. In the 'Address to Freedom' Said Nursi states that, 'with the advent of

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<sup>70</sup> A M nazarat lesson in Izmir, March 2013.



freedom, the Ottoman Empire has been given the opportunity to progress and establish true civilization, but this will be achieved only if shari'a will be made the foundation of freedom' (Hurriyet'e Hitab in Asar-i Bediyye: 346; Vahide 2005: 52-53). Nursi, then, believes that liberties have to be placed within the framework of Divine Law, and, in line with this predicament, provides the following definition of freedom: 'Delicate freedom is instructed and adorned by the good manners of the shari'a. Freedom to be dissolute and behave scandalously is not freedom. Rather, it is bestiality. It is the tyranny of the Devil. [...] General freedom is the product of the portions of individual freedoms. The characteristic of freedom is that one harms neither oneself, nor others' (Münazarat: 15-16).

The Yeni Nesil Constitution draft uses this concept of 'not harming others, nor the self' to delineate the limitations that should be posed to freedom: 'The Constitution should guarantee that every individual is free in every action that does not damage him or others. The merriness of freedom is that it should not damage the self, neither the other. [...] Freedom without limits is anarchy. The democratic regime should not lead toward anarchy and the destruction of the nation. The sale of alcohol, gambling and adultery should not be carried out with the hand of the state and with public resources. [...] The positive aspects of modernity [only] should be taken'. In this passage of the draft, Nur students, on the one hand, connect the exercise of liberties without constraints (that is, without the limitations indicated by shari'a) to social anarchy and, on the other hand, avoiding arguing in favour of the complete prohibition of alcohol consumption, gambling and adultery, limit their claims to the non-involvement of the state in these activities (Talep ve Temenniler, 2014: 8)<sup>71</sup>.

The theme of the boundaries of freedom was also addressed during a *sohbet* with young girls, in which the group discussed the need to choose the path of limited freedom (*sınırlı özgürlük*) over the path of unlimited freedom (*sınırsız özgürlük*). In the middle of the lesson, I asked what they meant by unlimited freedom. One of the young women attending the *sohbet* gave the following answer: 'You probably know the saying "Your freedom ends where the freedom of your neighbour begins". This is what limited freedom means, that you cannot do whatever you want at the expense of others'. The old woman who, on that day, was

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<sup>71</sup> The text represents an indirect request to the Parliament to abolish the following state institutions: the 'General Directorate for the Management of Tobacco, Tobacco Products, Salt and Alcohol' (*Tütün, Tütün Mamulleri, Tuz ve Alkol İşletmeleri A. Ş. Genel Müdürlüğü*), also known with the old name of TEKEL (monopoly), which holds a state monopoly over the sale of tobacco, salt and alcohol; the National Lottery (*Milli Piyango*), run by the state; and the '*Genelevleri*' (literally, collective houses) where prostitution is legally practiced (YNIst20). Note that this tactic of lobbying for 'intermediate reforms' is perfectly congruent with the community's philosophy of slow change with regards to the modification of the state structures and the principles they are based on.

supervising the lesson corrected her: “*They* [Westerners] say that this is limited freedom, but it is not like that for *us* [Muslims]<sup>72</sup>. In Islam, freedom means self-limitation. It means letting the mind that wants to follow the dictates of Allah win over the soul that instead seeks material pleasure. We can be free only if we respect the command of Allah, because there is no freedom outside the will of Allah”. All the young girls, including the one whose answer was deemed to be mistaken, appeared to be convinced by this explanation<sup>73</sup>.

Finally, on the same topic, Fırıncı Abi declared: ‘Europe is for us a model for its high standards of democracy, pluralism and respect of human rights, but it is wrong in its definition of freedom. Freedom does not mean that you can do whatever you want as long as you do not hurt anybody. Sometimes people damage themselves without realising it. In this case, the state has to be like the doctor that forces the rebellious patient to take his medicine. Maybe the patient does not even realise he is sick, so initially he will swallow the pills unwillingly, but then he will recover from his disease and be thankful to the doctor’ (YNIst16). Here the movement leader argues against a Western secular-liberal conception of freedom and is in favour of the endorsement of an Islamic view of liberties by the state. Resorting to a metaphor that Nursi often uses in his writing – that of the doctor-state – he considers a shari’a based form of freedom as the medicine that part of the population does not even realise it needs and that will doubtlessly be the cure to the diseases of the society.

#### 4.9 Justice

Nur students, following the method of the Risale, view justice as originating from God by virtue of His Names, such as Compassionate, All-Merciful, All-Wise and All-Just. It is this approach that generates an ontological conception of justice, according to which justice is the perfect balance originally implanted by God in all things and beings in the universe. In everything that is created there is equilibrium and order as well as well-measured regularity, well-measured sustenance and universal wisdom. Nursi develops this view by stating throughout the Risale that the universe – as well as the beings therein – demonstrates with its perfection the justice and wisdom of God. His argumentation is based on the following verses from the Quran: ‘Such is the artistry of God Who has created everything with due wisdom, balance and perfection’ (Q. 27:88); ‘It is He Who has created everything in the best form [or

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<sup>72</sup> The emphasis is meant to reproduce the stress of the voice.

<sup>73</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet* in Istanbul, April 2012.

has given the best form to everything he has created]’ (Q. 32:7); and ‘It is He Who has given to everything its due creation and then guided it’ (Q. 20: 50). If it is through God’s infinite justice that all things and beings are arranged in a perfect order and regularity, then justice has been in operation as a universal law since the very beginning of the creation. From this point of view, its meaning is to recognise to everything its right (*hakk*) and to give to every being its due existence. Finally, departing from the Quranic verse ‘We shall show them [to men] our signs on the horizons [in the universe] and within themselves [in human bodies and souls]’ (Q. 41:53), Nursi examines this spiritual and universal dimension of justice in two realms – the microcosm, that is, the human being, and the macrocosm, that is, the universe – underlining how the justice existing in these two domains is nothing other than an obvious sign of the presence of God.

An interviewee, when asked to explain the meaning of justice, gave concrete examples of perfection and equilibrium in these two realms and pointed out the connection between universal balance and human justice. He claimed: ‘*Adil* (Just) is one of the names of God. When God created the universe he gave to every single thing its due rights. If we look at the creation we see that in nature there is perfect justice. For example the position of our planet within the solar system is a sign of justice, if the earth was in the place of Mars there would be no life on it. It is the same for human beings. The fact that in the body each organ is in its own place and that each of them fulfils its function is a sing of justice. God in a just way put our hearts in exactly the right place, and the heart never says: “Today I am not going to work, I am just going to rest”. Injustice is only among people, never from God. The sentence “justice is the foundation of the nation” (*adalet mülkün temelidir*) is written in every courthouse in Turkey. The saying is attributed to Atatürk but the caliph Omar used to say it long before Atatürk. The judges interpret the word *mülk* (literally possession, property) as referring to the nation (*memleket*). They understand that sentence as “justice is the foundation of Turkey” (*adalet Türkiye’nin temelidir*). This is true and correct because a nation cannot survive if it is not based on justice. But for us [Nu students] the word *mülk* means also universe (*kâinat*). We interpret the sentence written in courthouses as “justice is the foundation of the universe”. It makes sense that such a saying is in the courthouses because justice in human societies is, and must be, based on the justice of the universe’ (YAIst04).

In order for men to appreciate the overall importance of justice in the universe, they have to observe and examine their own creation (i.e., their body) along with the creation of the world around them. In doing so, they become able to grasp the meaning of their worldly life within

the context of the Divine justice and then to assume more consciously their individual and collective responsibility in maintaining that justice. In the Risale men are indeed urged to take part in sustaining the balance of the world and are invited to fulfil this task at both individual and at societal level.

According to Nursi, the struggle to achieve justice at individual level is what is commanded by God on people in the following Quranic verse: ‘And He has raised the skies high, and He has set up [for all things] the balance of justice, so that you [O men,] may not transgress that balance. So weigh, therefore, [your acts] with justice and fall not short in the balance of justice’ (Q. 55:7-9). As Bilal Kuşpınar underlines, by making reference to this verse, Nursi connects the ontological justice that is observable in nature with the human ethical justice that is expected to be effective in human behaviour (Kuşpınar, 2007).

In concrete terms, to obtain justice within the self means embarking on a process of ethical training of the soul that aims at reaching ‘moderation’ and the ‘middle path’ (*al-wasat*) while avoiding ‘excess’ (*ifrāt*) and ‘deficiency’ (*tafrīt*). When talking about ‘disciplining the soul’ (*nefsi terbiye etmek*), Nur students recall Nursi’s classification of the forces given to men by God: the ‘carnal force’ (*kuvve-i şehviyye*); the ‘intellectual force’ (*kuvve-i akliye*) and the ‘force of rage’ (*kuvve-i gadabiyye*). The carnal force is the ability to obtain things that are positive and necessary for life, like getting food, shelter, or a wife. If this force is inadequate or deficient (*tefrit mertebesinde*), men will not desire and they will try to obtain things that are illicit (*haram*), not things that are licit (*halal*). If it is excessive or immoderate (*ifrat mertebesinde*), men will desire and will try to obtain not only things that are licit, but also those that are illicit and, in order to do so, they will infringe on innocent people’s rights. If this force is fair and moderate (*vasat mertebesinde*), people will desire and try to achieve only things that are licit and will respect other people’s rights. The intellectual force is the ability to distinguish good from evil. If it is deficient, men will not understand anything and will not be able to choose between useful and dangerous things. If it is immoderate, men will use their intelligence to make the good appear as evil and the evil appear as good. If it is moderate, men will be able to accept the good and refuse the evil. The force of rage is the strength to reject things that are adverse and destructive. If it is deficient, men will be scared of everything and will live their lives as if they were already dead. If it is immoderate, men will not be scared of anything neither from a material, nor from a spiritual point of view. Dictatorship and oppression are the results of this particular excess. If it is moderate, this force will keep men away from dangerous things and will make them courageous and ready to

sacrifice their soul for religious laws (The Signs of the Miraculous: 22-23 and 169-171; Mürsel, 1976: 72-75)<sup>74</sup>. In short, disciplining the soul means bringing the carnal force, the intellectual force, and the force of rage to their moderate form. The fastest, easiest, most sound and most appropriate road to reach this form is the respect of the shari'a law, since the latter is an admonition to men to pursue moderation in all of their actions.

If the ontological view of justice at the individual level takes the form of an ethical path towards the middle way, at societal level it leads to an interpretation of social justice predominantly as individual culpability and equality in front of the law. In the articulation of the justice that humans, with God's instruction, have to establish in society, an emphasis is put on the difference between 'pure justice' (*adalet-i mahza*) and 'relative justice' (*adalet-i izafile*). Bediüzzaman describes pure justice as the system where the rights of a single man cannot be cancelled for the sake of all the people. Without his consent, the rights of the individual cannot be sacrificed for the good of the community because in the eye of God there is no difference between the right of the small and the right of the big. Relative justice is instead the system where the particular is sacrificed for the universal. Attempts can be made to apply relative justice as the lesser of two evils (*ehvren-i şer*), but, if there are the conditions to apply pure justice, resorting to relative justice is sinful and mistaken (The Letters: 70-71).

The Yeni Nesil Constitution draft's section on justice also emphasises the legal dimension of the concept. The text states: 'The rights of an individual cannot be sacrificed without its approval for the interest of the state or the public good. Perfect justice (*adalet-i mahza*) implies individuality (*şahıslık*) of crime and justice in judicial responsibility. Perfect justice is this: the rights of an innocent person cannot be annulled for the sake of the entire nation. In the merciful eye of Allah the most high rights are inalienable [...]. The small (i.e. the weak) cannot be annulled by the big (i.e. the powerful). Perfect justice cannot turn into relativity; if it does it is an act of injustice. [...] The fundamental rights and freedom of the individual are above the interests of the state and the continuation of political regimes'.

At grassroots level, the idea of justice in society as equality in front of the law is often through the following story: 'At the time of the Sultan Fatih, the building of a mosque was commissioned of a Greek architect. This architect made the columns of the mosque shorter than ordered by the Sultan. The Sultan Fatih became very angry and, as a punishment, had the architect's hand cut off. So the Greek architect went to the *kadi* (judge) to complain. The *kadi*

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<sup>74</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet* in Istanbul, May 2012 and a Meşveret *sohbet* in Isparta, March 2013.

was Hısır Çelebi. He listened to the story and summoned the Sultan to the courthouse. When the Sultan showed up at the tribunal the Greek architect was already there, sitting on one side. The Sultan entered the courthouse and went to sit in a different place. The *kadi* stopped him and said: “You have to sit next to the Greek architect because here we are in a tribunal and the two of you are equal; within these walls you are not the Padishah”. The Sultan sat next to the architect and explained what had happened. Hısır Çelebi replied that he [the Sultan] had not the right to take a decision by himself without applying to a tribunal and declared him guilty of overstepping the judge’s authority. He decided that, as a punishment, the hand of the Sultan would be cut off. The architect was very surprised to win a legal case against the Muslim Sultan, since he was a regular person and a non-Muslim. He was so impressed with the justice system of the Ottomans that he converted to Islam and forgave the Sultan’<sup>75</sup>.

Finally, in the view of Nur students, working to spread the word of Allah in society is a way to ensure justice because, just as in the case of freedom, justice cannot be obtained outside of the respect of God’s will. Proselytising is thus their way to take on their responsibility to build justice in this world. During a lesson, in which the topic was the Divine judgment in the hereafter, a discussion on justice started. People participating in the debate underlined how the feeling of justice is connected to the belief in the hereafter and how people cannot hold a just behaviour without the awareness of being responsible for their action in front of God on the day of the judgment. For example, they explained, an atheist judge (*kadi*) will never be just. As a consequence, they continued, the only way to create justice in this world is to make people believe in the hereafter and create in their heart the fear of God. Still, this effort does not always succeed, and the lack of justice in this world is compensated by the work of the Tribunal of the Hereafter (*Mahkeme-i Kubra*), the only place where perfect justice exists. They concluded the discussion stating that there cannot be justice if the will of Allah is not respected, presenting the fact that adultery is not punished by law anymore as an example of the lack of justice in the contemporary world<sup>76</sup>. Here, once again we are confronted with a view of society that considers faith as the only possible source of social harmony and attributes to shari’a a crucial role in defining the common good.

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<sup>75</sup> I am reporting this story as it was told to me by YNIst21, but I heard it multiple times during interviews and informal conversations.

<sup>76</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet* in Istanbul, April 2012.

#### **4.10 The balance between the individual and society and the functioning of social classes**

Bediüzzaman perceives an organic relationship between the individual and the society. He underlines that since the creation men have shown the natural tendency to live together and points out that, once men get together, equilibrium needs to be found in their aggregation. The individual and society are equally important; both need to be protected and it is necessary that neither of them is superior to the other. In order to find such a balance, two things are necessary. At the individual level, people have to abandon the cult of the self without losing individuality, as a way to harmonise personal interests and the common good. At the societal level, on the basis of the legal dimension of the enforcement of justice, the rights of the individual cannot be sacrificed for the society (Mürsel, 1976: 100-101; YNIst02; YNIst05; YNIst20; YAIst02; YAIzm02; MesVan01; MedDiy01).

According to Nursi, while people must be before the law, they are not equal in absolute terms, in the sense that every person has his or her own uniqueness. It is this appreciation of diversity among human beings that drives him to argue in favour of a class-based society. According to the scholar, the fact that everybody is provided by God with different characteristics, abilities and inclinations, inevitably leads to social differentiation among people, which leads, in turn, to the formation of social classes. Since people were created different, it is impossible to establish among them a classless society, based on absolute equality (*mutlak eşitlik*). Differences among people should be seen as an opportunity to establish within society a positive competition based on faith and virtue. It is indeed only through faith and virtue that the formation of negative and disruptive opposition between classes can be avoided. In this righteous society founded on piety everybody will take his or her place according to his or her capacities. Each class will provide products or services that the other classes are not able to offer, so that all the classes will take care of each other's needs. In this way differences that are present in society will not lead to class struggle, but to solidarity among the various occupational groups (Mürsel, 1976: 123-126; YNIst03; YNIst17; YAIst02; YAIst04).

The crucial element to avoid class struggle in an inevitably class-based society is *zakat* (almsgiving). Nursi states: 'All immorality and instability in the social life of men proceeds from two sources. The first: "Once my stomach is full, what do I care if others die of hunger?" The second: "You work, I'll eat". That which perpetrates these two is the prevalence of usury and interest on the one hand, and the abandonment of *zakat* on the other. The only

remedy able to cure these two awesome social diseases lies in implementing zakat as a universal principle and in forbidding usury. Zakat is a most essential support of happiness, not merely for individuals and particular societies, but for all of humanity. There are two classes of men: the upper classes and the common people. It is only zakat that will induce compassion and generosity in the upper classes toward the common people, and respect and obedience in the common people toward the upper classes. In the absence of zakat, the upper classes will descend on the common people with cruelty and oppression, and the common people will rise up against the upper classes in rancour and rebellion. There will be a constant struggle, a persistent opposition between the two classes of men. It will finally result in the confrontation of capital and labour, as happened in Russia' (The Letters: 319). As the passage highlights, once again Quranic provisions – in this specific case zakat – are considered the most reasonable and effective solution to society's problems, in a view that equates the full implementation of Divine law to the end of all the social and political tensions existing among human beings.

The acceptance of class formation as an ineluctable social process and the lack of an economical dimension in Nur students' definition of justice pushed to me to ask some of my interviewees what their take was on social inequality, a topic that had never emerged in the sohbees I had attended. One of them gave a revealing answer: 'The fact that some people are rich and some are poor is not a sign of injustice. The way in which the poor and the rich will be judged in the hereafter will be very different. The responsibility of zakat is very high for rich people, whereas poor people will not be questioned about that in the Divine Tribunal. Islam solves the problem of economic differences through zakat and the prohibition of interest. These two provisions get rid of the deep gap between the rich and the poor that exists in the capitalist societies. In this way social justice is ensured. Moreover, we have to remember that whatever was given to a person by God is what is best for him and with the means and opportunities that were given to him he has to strive to be the best servant [of Allah] that he can be. This is our responsibility. Do we have the right to question what Allah gave us? Instead of focusing on the reasons why certain things were not given to us, we have to concentrate our efforts on pleasing God in accordance to our means. There was a companion of the Prophet called Salebe. He was called "bird of the mosque" (*camî kuşu*) because he was always seen in the courtyard of the mosque. He was the first to arrive for the collective prayer and the last to leave. He was poor to the point that he did not have anything to wear and was forced to borrow clothes from his friends. One day he asked the Prophet to



pray for him so that he could be richer. The Prophet replied: “This might not be good for you, you keep going like this”. He asked the same things to the prophet other three times and always got the same answer: “This might not be good for you”. But he did not listen to the Prophet and prayed Allah to become rich. Allah first gave him a sheep. Then the sheep had an offspring and his herd grew bigger. He stopped going to the mosque every day. Then, his herd grew even bigger and he stopped going to the Friday prayer. In the end, his herd became so big that all the valleys around Medina were covered with his sheep. At this point, he stopped praying completely. One day Salebe was asked to give *zakat* for his herd. He replied: “Zakat is given by Jews, not Muslims”. When this answer was reported to the Prophet, he revealed what Salebe’s fate would be. A relative of Salebe that happened to be in the presence of the Prophet at that moment told Salebe what he heard. Immediately after, Salebe brought some money to the Prophet as *zakat* and apologised to him. But the Prophet did not accept the money. Until the death of the Prophet, every year Salebe would bring money to him and he would not accept it. Nor did Abu Bakr or Omar, who followed the example of the Prophet. At the time of Uthmān<sup>77</sup>, Salebe was found dead in a valley outside Medina wearing Christian ornaments and a cross at his neck’.

This long reply is emblematic of the attitude that the majority of Nur students have towards the issue of economic equality. Their outlook involves: peaceful acceptance by the believer of his economic and social status, deemed to be what Allah has chosen for him on the basis of his personality; a confident reliance on the *zakat* as the most efficient form of wealth redistribution; and a strong rejection of the legitimacy of contention derived from socio-economical claims. This approach clearly places the community at the right of the political spectrum and is in line with Nur students’ staunch opposition to the spread across Turkey of socialist and communist political ideas in the '60s and 70s (see Chapter 2). The view, moreover, fits with the social composition of the movement, which is transversal to social classes (see introduction).

However, it is important to note that not everybody in the community shares the same opinion on this topic. When I asked the same question about social justice to interviewees belonging to the Med-Zehra group, the responses I received were quite different. One of them stated: ‘We cannot say that Bediüzzaman was a socialist, but he was certainly anti-capitalist. Bediüzzaman said that both socialism and capitalism are contrary to the spirit of Islam.

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<sup>77</sup> Abu Bakr, Omar and Uthman were the three caliphs that succeeded the Prophet.

Capitalism is for the benefit of a ferocious minority that for its own interests tries to obstruct the capacity of thinking of the majority. When he was asked how exploitation of population came into being, Bediüzzaman made references to capitalism. When he was asked why in our historical era there had been so many wars, he answered that the origin of the wars was the fight between labour and capital, that is, the attempt of capital to control and exploit labour on the one hand, and labour's resistance on the other. To another question about miners he replied that since he was young he had been against the capitalist class that practices despotism [...] According to the Risale, the justice [intended as order and balance] that is found in nature has to be reproduced in society. Unequal distribution of wealth among classes creates unbalance and does not reflect the order of nature, hence is against justice' (MedAnk03)<sup>78</sup>.

As highlighted by this interviewee, contrary to the rest of the community, the Kurdish subgroups emphasise the anti-capitalist nature of Nursi's thought. Many of my interviewees from these groups made references to the Risale to criticise the economic policies of the JDP government. In the same vein, they underlined that Turkish Nur students' inability or unwillingness to see that in Turkey there is an ongoing struggle between lower and higher classes and to interpret this struggle within the framework provided by the Risale, contributed to turn the Nur community into a passive movement subservient to the logic of state power (MedIst02; MedIst03; MedAnk03; MedMar01; MedVan01; MedVan02; IndIst01). Economic justice is one of the issues on which the interpretation of the Risale differs between predominantly Turkish and predominantly Kurdish subgroups. Moreover, Kurdish community members' criticisms of other Nur students' acceptance of the JDP's economic policies is indicative of a greater divergence of opinions on daily politics among the two sections of the movement (see Chapter 5).

#### **4.11 The State**

For Beddiuzzaman, the state needs to be a strong organisation which aims at the preservation of its unity, retains a central authority, respects the rights of the individuals, ensures freedom and protects its members from oppression and dictatorship. The state comes out of the natural

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<sup>78</sup> While answering my question, the interviewee quoted several passages from a book published by Zehra Yayıncılık entitled 'Social Lessons' (İçtimai Dersler), in which Nursi's writings on social and political matters are collected. On the issue of capitalism and labour see for example, İçtimai Dersler, 2012: 234-234 and 490-493.

propensity of men to get together and organise themselves in social structures. But, what makes its existence and its legitimacy truly possible is the fact that it is the product of the will of God and that it represents the bond of society. Said Nursi's concise definition of the state, quoted by Nur students in every discussion on the topic, presents an interesting juxtaposition of terms. The definition is the following: 'The state is a collective personality (*şahs-i manevi*). It is like a child, its growth is progressive' (The Signs of the Miraculous: 112).

The first part of the definition equates the state to a collective personality. Characterising the state as *şahs-i manevi* is a way to transplant into the political arena the feelings of unity and collectivity that are created in the religious field through adherence to the same beliefs, and that are deemed essential for the coming together of society. The use of a religious-spiritual vocabulary to define the state underlines, again in the Durkheimian way, the need for collective sentiments and ideas and the irreplaceable role of religion in sustaining society by ensuring moral order and social integration. Moreover, in his designation, Nursi makes the religious bond the foundation of the political and renders social legitimization of political institutions dependent on their 'spiritual power'. Thus, the state is normatively portrayed as an institution that, on the one hand, preserves religion's function of self-representation of society (Durkheim, 1964) and, on the other hand, acts as a moral being. Finally, Nursi's definition gives a spiritual dimension to modernity. The state the scholar refers to is indeed the modern nation-state and his analysis on the subject is intended to serve the needs of modern society. His tactic of ascribing religious features to a modern concept ensures cultural and cognitive continuity in the passage from the pre-modern to the modern era, in a view that fuses traditional conceptualisations with contemporary rationality.

The second part of the definition hints at the fact that the state, like a human being, evolves slowly and reaches its full development only with time, through gradual steps. For this reason, alterations of the structure or the nature of the state can only be successful if they are obtained through slow change. Accordingly, transformations that are the product of sudden revolutions are doomed to fail (Mürsel, 1976: 188-190; YAIst06; YAIst10). During a radio programme broadcasted by *Bizim Radyo*<sup>79</sup>, in which the host would read some pages from the *Münazarat* each day, the idea of the progressive growth of the state was expressed in the following way: 'Tribesmen of Eastern Anatolia who were not convinced of constitutional monarchy

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<sup>79</sup> *Bizim Radyo* (Our Radio) is a radio station that belongs to the Yeni Asya group. The programme about the *Münazarat* was broadcast in the autumn of 2012. I kindly thank the director of the radio station, Mehmet Yaşar, for providing me with a record of the entire programme so that I could listen to it at home.

(*meşrutiyet*) complained that the government under the new conditions was as weak as it used to be [before the declaration of the constitution]. Bediüzzaman answered that a 9 year old child can look as weak as a 90 year old man, but the child might grow into a strong adult, whereas the old man is close to passing away. It means that a young constitutionalism might become strong with time and that the tribesmen needed to wait for its development’.

In the book by Safa Mürsel, the necessary conditions for the continuity and reformation of the state are listed: national unity (*ittihad-i kulub*, literally, the unity of the hearts); love of the nation (*muhabbet-i milli*); education (*maarif*); abandonment of the indulgence in pleasures (*terk-i sefahet*) and human work (*sa’y-i insani*). These five conditions or principles were originally indicated by Said Nursi in the ‘Address to Freedom’ as the ‘five doors’ that the Ottoman nation had to enter if it wanted to proceed on the road of progress and freedom, but are considered valid also with regard to the Turkish Republic. Said Nursi’s call for national unity is interpreted as a stance in favour of a unitary and centralised state, and against a federal state that would grant a degree of autonomy and self-government to the various regions of Turkey. By love of the nation, instead, the author means the spiritual force and affection that binds together citizens of the same state. By education he refers to the need to increase the literacy level of the population and to spread science and culture across the country. Mürsel also recalls how Bediüzzaman saw the increase of indolence and indulgence in worldly pleasure as one of the causes of the Ottoman Empire’s decline and underlines that, in order to give strength to the state, people should have high material and spiritual aims. Finally, by human work he means the need that every citizen of the state gains self-sustenance through a job that is appropriately remunerated and that ensures him legitimate gains (*helal kazanç*) (Mürsel, 1976: 190-193).

When interrogated about the kind of state they wanted, the interviewees often replied by making references to two metaphors used by Said Nursi in the *Münazarat*: the doctor-state and the servant-state. To explain the difference between the old and the new regime, in the *Münazarat* Said Nursi draws on the image of the doctor. Before the 1908 revolution the government, he claims, was like a doctor who used to give prescriptions to patients without seeing them. Authorities used to sit in their palaces in Istanbul without really knowing what was going on in the provinces of the Empire, so they would send to the various regions medicines that were not able to cure their diseases. Instead, with the new regime, Nursi continues, there would be consultation and communication between people and governors and the right prescriptions would be used to cure the country (*Münazarat*: 58-59; YN1st07;

YNIst17; YNIst21; YAIst07; YAMar01; Meşİst03; MeşGaz01). In the radio programme where the Münazarat were read, the image of the doctor-state was depicted with an emphasis on modernity: ‘In contemporary medicine one of the methods to understand a patient’s disease is to interrogate him directly about how he is feeling and what are his symptoms. In the same way, just like a doctor, if the modern state wants to be successful in finding a cure for society’s illness, it has to ask the people directly what are their doubts and fears and find solutions that are a direct response to the citizens’ voices’.

Still in the Münazarat, Said Nursi underlines often that governments are nothing more than servants. For example, to the people who asked him how it was possible that, according to the new Constitution (the one promulgated after the 1908 revolution), Armenians and Greek had the right to become prefects (*vali*) and governors (*kaymakam*)<sup>80</sup>, he replied that this was possible because in a truly constitutional monarchy sovereignty belongs to the people and governments are meant to serve the population, not to command it. In the new order of things prefects and governors are not chiefs (*reis*) anymore, but paid servants (*ücretli hizmetkar*), who do nothing more than carry out a procedural job. As a consequence, what matters is their skills and training in the art of administration, and not their religious faith. (Münazarat: 192-193; YNIst05; YNIst11; YNIst12; YAIsp03; YAIzm02; Meşİst01).

#### **4.12 Democracy: a theological need**

Throughout the Risale Said Nursi traces the origin of democracy in Islam and defines its functioning according to Islamic principles. Most of the time Nursi uses the word *meşrutiyet* (constitutional monarchy) instead of *demokrasi* (democracy) as most of his writings on the topic date back to the 1908 revolution. Chronologically speaking, the first text written by the scholar on the issue of democracy is the ‘Address to Freedom’, in which Nursi claims that constitutionalism has to be accepted because it is possible to deduce it from the four schools of Islamic law and from the Quran. There he also states that the entire community should participate in the political process, that the rulers’ actions should reflect the will of the nation, and that a form of government based on these principles would be enjoyed by Islam (Hurriyet’e Hitab in Asar-i Bediyye: 348). In this and in all the subsequent works on the political regime that men should establish, Nursi uses arguments that do not make any

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<sup>80</sup> This right was previously granted only to the Muslim population.

reference to Western-secular political thought and portrays democracy as a political doctrine that stems naturally from Islamic faith and that is inherent in Islamic tradition.

His followers consider his analysis of constitutional monarchy to be perfectly valid for modern day democracy and use the words *meşrutiyet* and *demokrasi* interchangeably. They see constitutional monarchy and democracy – as well as sultanate and caliphate – as the actualisation in different historical contexts of the same principles of belief. In that regard, they point out that the Quran, while being very specific about family, labour and commerce laws, gives only general guidelines about what today we would call constitutional law, and leaves this field open to the historical evolution of human society. In order to clarify their position on the issue of democracy, they often recall the answer that Nursi used to give to those who accused him, during the first decades of the Turkish Republic, of being against the established order: ‘I am a religious republican’ (*dindar bir cumhuriyetçiyim*). By calling themselves ‘religious republicans’ in the footsteps of their master, Nur students simultaneously underline that religiosity and republicanism can go in hand in hand and that they are in favour of a republic founded on religious principles.

In their socio-political imaginary the case for democracy is built by resorting to three different sets of arguments, which are exegetical, historical, and theological in nature. The first group of arguments focuses on the Quranic verses that deal with government among men. The second individuates the source of the democratic spirit of Islam in the formative years of Islam and in the political experience of the first four Caliphs. The third connects the practice of democracy to the construction of the proper relationship between the believer and Allah.

As far as exegetical arguments are concerned, Nursi indicates three verses of the Quran that, according to him, set the foundation of men’s effort to build democracy. The verses are the following: ‘And consult them in affairs [of public concern]’ (Q. 3:159); ‘There shall be no compulsion in [the acceptance of] religion’ (Q. 2:256); and ‘do not take one another as lords [instead of Allah]’ (Q. 3:64). The first verse refers to the practice of consultation and is an injunction directed at governors to hear citizens’ opinion on issues of public interest. The second verse refers to the need that Muslims believe in God and practice Islam not by imposition, but in full consciousness and of their own will. In order to do so, it is necessary that Muslims live in a democracy – that is, in an institutional context where they freely choose to believe and are not obliged to do so. Finally, the third verse warns men against treating other men as gods, thus committing the sin of associating partners with Allah. Treating other

men as gods for Nur students means submitting to their will and granting them authority, thus forgetting that the only Being whose authority men have to submit to is Allah. The only political system that allows men to take Allah as their one and only Lord is democracy, since it does not permit the power of men over other men.

With the principles of democracy enmeshed into Quranic teachings, establishing or reinforcing democratic institutions in Muslim countries does not mean learning something from the West, but restoring the true spirit of Islam. Historical arguments in favour of democracy revolve around the idea that the early phase of the Islamic Caliphate was, in fact, a form of Republic. In an often-quoted passage from the *Risale*, for example, Nursi states: ‘The four Right Guided Caliphs were both Caliphs and Presidents of the Republic. [...] But not as an empty name and title, they were heads of a religious republic which bore the name of true justice and freedom in accordance with the Shari’a’ (The Rays: 386).

In the same vein, one interviewee expounded that the spirit of democracy is what Muslims inherited from the foundational period of Islam. While making this point, he also added another important element: the spirit of democracy is so crucial for the correct practice of the Islamic religion, that the believer can, and must, rebel against the Islamic ruler if he, despite his religiosity, stands for despotism instead of constitutionalism. This is how he expressed his view: ‘During the first years of Islam there was such a pluralist vision of society. On the one hand there was not a democracy in the modern sense of the word, but on the other hand that era left us a socio-political democratic heritage. The Umayyad caliphs<sup>81</sup>, by establishing a monarchy, destroyed and turned into its opposite the legacy that the first four caliphs left us. [...] at a time when there was a religious Sultan like Abdülhamid, why did Bediüzzaman act against him and allied with people that were not so religious [the CUP]? Why did he collaborate with the *Ahrar Fırkası* (Party of the Supporter of Freedom) for a more democratic and free country? In theory a Muslim scholar should have sided with the Muslim Sultan; we expect that, from a political point of view, he would feel closer to the Sultan. But Bediüzzaman recognised that Abdülhamid, notwithstanding his religiosity, resorted to repression to obtain his political goals. So he allied with people that, despite not being very religious, claimed that the country needed freedom and constitutional monarchy. Why? When Beddiuzzaman explains his motivations he makes references to the four caliphs. He says they were governors who were chosen democratically. At the beginning of Islam there was not a

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<sup>81</sup> The Umayyad Caliphate was established in 661 CE by Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan after a war against Ali, the fourth of the Right-Guided Caliphs.

paternalistic mentality or a mentality of violence, the caliphs were not in power because their fathers were caliphs, neither because they were stronger militarily. Bediüzzaman does not think that democracy and a pluralist way of living together come from Greece or from the West. He sees democracy as a way of living together that was created by the Prophet with his companions and put into practice by the caliphs [...] The political system apt to Islam is the one according to which governors are chosen by people, govern in consultation with people and are responsible before people' (Indist02).

The idea of governments' accountability as a fundamental feature of democracy that was established and respected in the formative stage of Islam comes out often in the conversations among Nur students, sometimes in the form of the following story: 'Omar (the second caliph) after a war divided the spoils among the population. Then, to give a speech, he sat on his throne wearing a robe that nobody had seen before. As soon as he started speaking, one of the believers that had come to hear his talk interrupted him and said "Stop Omar, we are not going to listen to you! You took a bigger part of the war chest. We could not make robes with our shares, you instead have a new robe". Omar then turned to his son and said: "Abdullah, stand up and explain". Abdullah stood up and explained that he had given his share to his father. This was the reason why Omar could have a robe made for himself. The man who had complained understood and said to the Caliph that, since he had acted legitimately, he was going to listen to him'<sup>82</sup>. One of the interviewees that recalled this story commented: 'This is to explain that the administration of the state can be challenged and criticised even if a Muslim government is in power and that a good ruler listens to the complaints of the population and responds to them. This is what we call transparency. Today it is very hard to stand up against governments because there is repression and the state restricts some of the citizens' freedom. Or, if it gives them the freedom to react, it does not listen to their complaints. At that time instead [the time of Omar] there was an ethic that flowed from faith and that was visible in those in power as well as in citizens. This ethic was a guarantee of basic freedom and rights' (YAIst01).

From a theological point of view, as showed above, the establishment of democracy is dependent on the total submission of the believer to God. This is how the topic was addressed during a Münazarat lesson at *Bizim Radio*: 'Despotism is oppression and occurs when an individual in society acts however he wants, imposes his will on others, and casts them under

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<sup>82</sup> I am reporting this story as heard from YAIst01.



his rule. If you notice, here Bediüzzaman connects despotism to the individual and to the belief system. He shows that despotism is related to the development and features of the individual. The despot is the one who does not recognise any thought or idea other than his own and imposes things on others by using force and compelling them. This happens when people do not recognise Allah as their one and only Lord. When the governors of a nation have this attitude, the population suffers from tortures and oppression'. The host of the radio programme also underlined that democracy is an institutional arrangement, necessarily deriving from the choice of Allah to grant free will to people. It is so because, without constitutionalism, people would not be able to use in the political sphere the partial will God gave them and to take on the responsibilities that derive from it. That it is to say, without constitutionalism people would not be able to fully develop the features and faculties they were created with.

Another significant theological argument in favour of democracy is derived from the names of Allah. The reasoning is based on the fact that men on earth have to imitate the way God governs the universe and reproduce among human beings – insofar as is possible – the perfect Divine reign. A very young and bright lady belonging to the Scribes group, who gives Risale lessons in the Istanbul neighbourhood of Fatih, one day explained to her listeners why Divine lordship dictates that people build democracy: 'Among the many names of our Lord (*Rab*), there are *Hakim* (Wise), *Şafî* (Affectionate) and *Adil* (Just). *Rububiyet* (lordship) contains in itself *hikmet* (wisdom); *şefkat* (affection) and *adalet* (justice). We see wisdom in the fact that all the living creature and nature are governed according to perfect a law, the shari'a law. We see affection in the fact that God blesses with the same bounties his creatures – plants, animals and men – and does it indistinctively and unconditionally, no matter if people believe or do not believe in Him. Finally, we see justice in the fact that rewards or punishment in the hereafter is connected to behaviour and respect of religious duties in this world. Also directorship (*müdüriyet*) among men has to manifest the names of lordship (*rububiyet sıfatları*). For example a teacher in his class or a father in his family must be wise, affectionate, and just. This applies also to the state. The state has to show wisdom by getting organised and administering people according to the law of God that is, shari'a law; it has to show affection by guaranteeing the same rights – rights to healthcare, to education, to have a house, to express opinions – to everybody, no matter what are their ideas or attitudes; it has to show justice by judging everybody in the same way, without discriminations, and by giving punishments which are proportionate to the fault. Only such a state can be an Islamic state,

and the only way a state can reach wisdom, affection and justice is by being a democratic republic, because it is only through democracy that everybody's rights can be respected and justice can be obtained'.

Finally, Nur students make a case for the need to build democracy based on universal, natural rights, but only when their speeches and writings are directed at the outside. For example, the Yeni Nesil constitution draft states the following regarding the Republic: 'The Constitution is constructed upon justice, democracy and the supremacy of the law. The Republic consists of justice, consultation and the rule of law. The true duty of the Republic must be the protection of the fundamental rights and freedoms, the promotion of the development of the individual and the society and the prevention of the domination of a person over another person. The Republic has the duty to avoid the tyranny over citizens by other citizens or by public authorities. History and the experiences of the humankind have demonstrated that civilization and, as a consequence, humanity need to make reference to texts based on universal principles, like the "Declaration of Human Rights"' (Talep ve Temenniler, 2012: 4). This passage is once again an example of how the community adjusts its discourse to the parameters of the secular state when presenting its views in the public sphere. And, once again, it is an example of how this alteration is operated at the level of formulations and references, in a way that leaves intact the substance and the content of the community's imaginary.

#### **4.13 Collective responsibility on the way to democracy**

In Nur students' socio-political imaginary, the idea that serious responsibilities are associated to freedom and democracy is very strong and plays a significant role in defining their identity as citizens. Community members recall how at the beginning of the Mûnazarat Said Nursi teaches the practice of *meşrutiyet* (constitutional monarchy) to his interlocutors. At the beginning of the book Nursi is portrayed as surrounded by people who ask him questions in a disorganised and confused way. His reaction is to invite his interlocutors to choose among themselves representatives entrusted with the duty of asking questions, so that they would learn the meaning and the practice of delegating someone to represent their interests. Quoting this episode of the Mûnazarat, Nur students underline that free elections imply first of all the duty of expressing preferences and choosing among the members of the community (intended as the nation-state) the most capable representatives.

In the same vein, they often quote a metaphor used by Said Nursi in the *Münazarat*, which I report with the words of one interviewee: ‘In a dictatorship the water deposit is upstairs [in a place not accessible to the population]. People do not have control over it; they do not even know when they will be able to drink the water. Those in power never consult with them and they end up being left without water and without freedom. Instead, in a democracy the pool of water is downstairs [in a place accessible to people]. Everybody has control over it. Everybody fills the pool by voting, but they have to fill it with clean water because they will drink what they pour’ (*Münazarat*, 104-106; YAIst06).

Besides pointing out the importance of a conscious and careful electoral behaviour, Nur students call for the active involvement of believers in the process of building democracy. This invitation is based on Nursi’s theory of destiny. During the reading of the *Münazarat* on *Bizim Radio*, the programme host explained: ‘As Bediüzzaman said, we have to stop being lazy and build a railroad out of virtue and knowledge. The faster we build this railroad the faster constitutional monarchy will come to us. Here again, partial will is the indispensable condition because it must be our choice to work to establish constitutional monarchy. As a society, we have to struggle to reach democracy. Only if our societal strength is not enough, should the state mechanism come into play. They [people with whom Said Nursi had a conversation in the *Münazarat*] asked Bediüzzaman whether it is not enough to be good believer without getting involved in social processes. In his reply Bediüzzaman criticises the idea of resignation (*tevekkül*) in Islam, which is submission and passive acceptance of destiny, and argues in favour of using the partial will Allah gave us. We have to help our destiny (*kaderimize yardım etmeliyiz*) [...], actual will comes together with responsibility.’

The sentence used by the programme host ‘we have to help our destiny’ has wide circulation among community members and is often quoted to express the need of active participation in the democratisation process. In the spring of 2013 I followed a group of female university students in their early twenties, who decided to meet every Friday morning in front of the Aya Sofia Mosque to read the *Münazarat*. One day the girls went over a passage in which Bediüzzaman exhorted people to rejoice for the proclamation of the new Constitution and invited them to not passively wait to see what destiny Allah had reserved to them but to use their ‘practical will’ and actively take part in the new regime. The girls commented: ‘Just like Bediüzzaman advised to these people, we have to “help our destiny” (*kaderimize yardım etmeliyiz*). We have to do this in our time and in our homeland. It is our destiny and the

destiny of all Islamic countries to become free and democratic and we have to do everything that is in our power to make this happen’.

In the two extracts quoted above, community members, by equating democratisation with destiny, affirm that democracy corresponds to the will of God and that it is the end-result of the path God has chosen for men. At the same time, by pointing out the need to ‘help destiny with the faculty of partial will’, they underline the fact that men’s role on earth is to choose actively and out of his free will to stay on the road God has traced for them. In this way Nursi’s theory of individual destiny is extended to common destiny and personal responsibility is turned into a form of social responsibility that is conducive to collective action.

Another renowned metaphor that expresses the importance of collective responsibility is the one of the ‘republican ants’. The allegory is drawn from the following segment of the Risale: ‘They asked me there [in court]: “What do you think about the Republic?” I replied: “As my biography which you have in your hands proves, I was a religious republican before any of you [...] was born. A summary is this: like now, I was living at that time in seclusion in a remote tomb. They used to bring soup and I used to give the breadcrumbs to the ants. I used to eat my bread having dipped it in the soup. They asked me about it and I told them: the ant and bee nations are republicans. I give the breadcrumbs to the ants out of respect for their republicanism”’ (The Rays: 385-386).

An interviewee explained the meaning of this passage: ‘What does it mean that the ants are republicans? It means that they work together in alliance and cooperation for a common aim. This emphasises the concepts of duty, responsibility, and hard work. The word *cumhuriyet* (republic), which in Latin is *res publica*, means “belonging to the people”. So being republican means working for the people; it means putting the public, common, interest before personal interests. Republicanism is effort and devotion for the nation aimed at society. From a political point of view republicanism indicates constitutionalism emerging from the people’s alliance. Political republicanism makes sense only if you first create a true commonality among the people, otherwise it is just a name devoid of meaning’ (IndAnk01). It can be noticed that this explanation echoes the definition of the state as a collective personality for the emphasis it places on the need to build ties and common feelings among people and to dissolve personal interests and aspirations into the collective social body as a first necessary step to build a political union.

#### 4.14 Legitimation of and resistance to Republican Institutions

Nur students' view of the state, together with the 'elective affinity' existing between their ethics and the spirit of democracy, made possible the acceptance and legitimation of secular democracy in Turkey by the community. During the *sohbets* I attended, the ideas of Republic and Republican Constitution emerged in contexts where an outside observer would not have expected to find them. For instance, during a lesson about the resurrection of the bodies in the hereafter, the Divine command by which in an instant all the souls are gathered in the presence of Allah was compared to the effects that the principles established by the Constitution have on the lives of the citizens. As a community member explained: 'Just as, thanks to a Divine sign, in a second all the souls of the world are congregated in one place, so the dictates of the Constitution in a second are enforced all over the Republic'<sup>83</sup>.

Also, the Republic is sometimes understood in organisational terms as a human reproduction of the divinely created world; even though, obviously, the Republic lacks the perfection of the world. In a debate on the beauty of the creation, the laws of nature established by God to govern the world were compared to the laws that derive from the Constitution and are meant to govern the Republic. When I asked for a clarification about the relation between Divine law and republican law I was told: 'Just like, as believers, we have to obey to the law of God, so, as citizens, we have to obey the Constitution'<sup>84</sup>. Finally, a method utilised in the *sohbets* to explain the difference between *uluhiyet* (literally divinity), the belonging to Allah of everything that is created, and *rububiyet* (literally lordship), the Divine government of the world, is comparing the first to the activities of the President of the Republic (*Cumhurbaşkanı*) and second to the activities of the Prime Minister (*Başbakan*)<sup>85</sup>. All of these passing references to the Republic and the Constitution during lessons where the tenets of belief were discussed indicate first, that the Republic and Constitution are recognised as familiar concepts that can help to explain, by way of comparison, less well known religious notions; and, second, that they are perceived as natural and valid institutions to which allegiance is due.

Finally, two simple – yet revealing – anecdotes that circulate among Nur students highlight their acknowledgment of secular establishments. I report the first one as heard during a *sohbet*: 'A high school student once went to Bediüzzaman and confided to him his intention

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<sup>83</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet* in Istanbul, April 2012.

<sup>84</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet* in Istanbul, April 2012.

<sup>85</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet* in Istanbul, March 2012.

to quit state school and enrol in a [at that time illegal] Quranic school due to the fact that his teachers never mentioned God during classes and acted as if God did not exist. Bediüzzaman replied: “You should keep going to school and you should listen carefully to your teachers. When the teachers are talking about the laws of physics, mathematics and biology they are, in fact, talking about God. Is not God the one who created those laws in their extreme perfection? So, when you learn about physics, mathematics and biology you are, in fact, learning about God”<sup>86</sup>.

The second anecdote is reported the way it was narrated in the biography of Mehmet Kırkınıcı. One day some university students went to visit Mehmet Kırkınıcı and during the meeting claimed that they were not performing the daily prayers because Turkey was ‘*dar al-harp*’<sup>87</sup>. They explained that they considered their home country as the ‘house of war’ because on the wall of the Parliament, a place where many sins were committed, it was written ‘Sovereignty belongs unconditionally to the people’ (*Egemenlik Kayıtsız ve Sartsız Milletindir*), whereas the truth is that ‘Sovereignty belongs unconditionally to Allah’ (*Egemenlik Kayıtsız ve Sartsız Allahındır*). After underlining that also in the ‘house of war’ believers need to perform the daily prayers, Kırkınıcı explained: ‘What is written on the wall of the Parliament means that people are sovereign in the choice of the rulers that will govern them. In Islam choosing the head of the state and dismissing those who do not govern according to justice are the people’s most legitimate rights. It is not those who are chosen who have sovereignty over people, but it is the people who has sovereignty over those who are chosen’ (Kırkınıcı, 2004: 287-288).

However, the fact that Nur students have historically accepted secular institutions does not equate to an appreciation for the strict secularism on which the Republic was founded, nor does it mean that, according to the community, these institutions are perfect the way they are and not in need of change. Bediüzzaman himself set the model for this simultaneous acceptance of and criticism toward the secular state. In January 1923, nine months before the foundation of the Republic (29 October 1923), Said Nursi, who had supported the establishment of the Grand National Assembly (Turkish Parliament) during the Turkish war of liberation (1919-1922), made a trip to Ankara to give a speech to the newly instituted Parliament and distributed a circular among Parliament representatives. In the document, Said

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<sup>86</sup> A Yeni Asya *sohbet* in Istanbul, April 2013.

<sup>87</sup> *Dar al-harp* (house of war) in Islam refers to those countries where the Islamic law is not enforced and where Muslims cannot practice their religion freely and safely, as opposed to the *Dar al-Islam* (house of Islam), also called *Dar as-salam* (house of peace), which refers to the lands that are dominated by Islam. Note that this anecdote took place in the '70s, at a time when the idea was spreading among Muslims that secular regimes in Muslim countries had transformed those nations into the *dar al-hap* and hence needed to be fought.

Nursi stated that, ‘due to the power invested in it by the nation, the Parliament now represented the Sultanate’. It had also to represent the Caliphate. In order to do this, it had to take care of the nation’s religious needs; it had to both respect its religious obligations and to make sure that religious obligations were fulfilled by the nation. If the Parliament performed these duties, the nation would invest it with the ‘power to carry out the Caliphate’s functions’. However, he wrote, if due to its members’ inattention and disregard towards religious duties, the Parliament did not have the power to do this, discord and disunion would spread in the country. Finally, he added that true and serious work in the Parliament could be done by those who, ‘comprising the meaning of the Caliphate, accepted delusions arising from the sophistry of the soul and the whispering of Satan’ (Tarihce-i Hayat, 124; Vahide, 2005:170).

From these words, it is clear that Bediüzzaman intended and accepted the Republic as a modern substitute of the Caliphate, which should have carried out in the contemporary era the same functions performed in the previous era by the Caliphate. Here it is important to note that the view of Said Nursi on the issue of the Caliphate and the Republic coincides perfectly with the spirit of the Turkish law that in 1924 abolished the Caliphate. The law was the result of a long and lively debate among the *ulama*. In the first article of the law it is stated: ‘Since the Caliphate is already inherent in the meaning and concept of government and Republic the separate office of Caliphate is abolished’ (Kara, 2002: 110; Silverstein, 2010: 59). As Silverstein argues, crucial to the reasoning that led to the abolition was not that the new republican regime intended to deny the role played by Islam in society and the state. On the contrary, the abolition was justified on the grounds that the traditional functions of the caliphate could now be performed by the Republic. The author of the text of the law was a Sufi *shaikh*, Savfet Efendi. His reasoning was that if the meaning of Caliph is he ‘who ensures the management of the affairs of the community according to justice and truth’ and if there is accord among Muslims that now the Republic can, and should, accomplish this task, then the logical conclusion is that the Republic is able to carry the meaning of the Caliphate, and there is no reason for a separate institution of the Caliphate to exist (Silverstein, 2010: 59-61).

If Nursi’s circular to Parliament representatives recognises the new regime as legitimate on the grounds of Islam, it also criticises harshly the new government for its laxity in religious practices and warns it against the dangerous consequences of this behaviour. In other words, while supporting the new establishment in its ideal, institutional form, he did not approve of the way in which new authorities administrated public affairs. As we know from his biography, after not receiving a positive response from the Parliament, Nursi left Ankara in

great disappointment. However, without starting any revolutionary action, he silently worked within society to counterbalance what he considered to be the negative effects of the new elites' attitude (see Chapter 2).

This episode of his life set the grounds for Nur students' attitudes towards republican institutions: they regard them as legitimate in the sense that they represent the form of government that more than any other is appropriate to a Muslim society, but they totally reject the secularisation reforms implemented by the Turkish state and its attempt to have control over religion, considering them as policies than run contrary to the spirit of Islam. Moreover, just like Nursi did, they respect state institutions while simultaneously aiming at offsetting the state's official ideology in the fields where the latter does not coincide with their views<sup>88</sup>.

In the Risale there is indeed the idea that governments, whether Islamic or not, can be criticised and opposed. The story quoted above about the new robes of Omar and the example of Said Nursi acting against the Sultan Abdülhamid II lead to such an attitude. To support the idea that resistance is appropriate towards unjust government Nur students also underline how both Abu Bakr and Omar in their speeches to their people used to invite them not to follow them and to raise their voice against them if, as caliphs, they had departed from the path of Allah. Opposition, then, is legitimate, but only to the extent that it does not turn into a revolution.

#### **4.15 The path toward implementation of Shari'a**

At this point, some words need to be devoted to the way in which Nur students' imaginary, community members' support of democracy and respect for secular institutions is reconciled with their Islamic conceptualisation of freedom and justice and with their wish to live in a society where shari'a is fully implemented. The solution to this (only apparent) pitfall is the foundation an Islamic state that is, a state whose laws are based on the principles of shari'a, through democratic means, in a process that starts with the Islamization of individual citizens.

The Islamic state is for Nur students the ultimate goal of their activism. In order to achieve it, they claim, it is necessary to start from the individual. In the 'chain of faith-life-shari'a'

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<sup>88</sup> Just to give an example, when in 1932 a state regulation made it compulsory in Turkey to sing the *adhān* (call to prayer in Islam) in Turkish, Nur students did not protest against the new law but they neither did they abide by it. Instead, they started to have collective prayers in private houses where the *namaz* (ritual prayer) was preceded by the *adhān* read in Arabic.



(*iman-hayat-şariat silsilesi*) the different stages are not one after another, but one into the other, in a totality. Still, it is necessary to concentrate on individual faith because, as faith strengthens, people naturally feel the need to live according to the principles of Islam and push for an organisation of society that allows them to live in this way. With time, as a result of a ‘natural flow’ (*fitri bir akış*), religiosity will have effects on bureaucracy and politics. Shari’a will be then implemented through a democratic process: the population will become religious and will influence state institutions, issues connected to religion will not be the object of debate anymore and the entire political system will be at the service of religion (Güleçyüz, 2011: 85-88). The Islamic state, then, will be democratic because it will be the outcome of people’s will and because, through electoral processes, it will respect people’s will.

This bottom-up approach is often defended against what Nur students call the ‘top-down Islamization approach (*tepeden dindarlaştırma*) of political Islam’. Fırıncı Abi explained the difference between the two attitudes in the following way: ‘Political Islam aims at putting at the head of the village a religious *mukhtar* (the elected head of the village or the neighbourhood within a town or a city), so that he will impose shari’a on everybody. We, instead, aim at making people religious so that they will ask the *mukhtar* to implement shari’a’ (YNIst17). The logical corollary of this approach is that, in order to found an Islamist party, it is necessary that the population has to be for at least sixty or seventy per cent ‘completely religious’ (*tam dindar*). If Islam comes to power when times are not ripe, there is the risk that politics will make an instrumental use of religion (Güleçyüz, 2011: 86-87).

Nur student’s delineation of the path that brings to the implementation of shari’a is perfectly congruent with their pro-state, non-revolutionary attitude and with their view of the state as a collective personality that evolves slowly, since it envisions a slow process that starts with instilling religious values in individual consciousness, does not entail a sudden overthrow of the existing regime, requires respect of democratic procedures, and aims at creating a society held together by the bond of religion.

#### **4.16 Jihad in the modern world**

The modernisation project Said Nursi carries out in the Risale and his attempt to read the Islamic doctrine through the lens of the modern age unfold also through the scholar’s analysis

of jihad. Said Nursi, on the one hand, maintains the classical Islamic distinction between ‘greater jihad’ or ‘internal jihad’ (which the believer has conducted against his own soul) and ‘minor jihad’ or ‘external jihad’ (to be conducted against the enemies), and frequently invites his followers to conduct the great jihad within their own conscience. On the other hand, as Vahide points out, he presents an interpretation of jihad that is moulded on the notion that the contemporary era is the age of science and civilization, in contrast with the former era when savagery prevailed and force and compulsion ruled in the world (Vahide, 1995: 2). The result of the domination of science and reason in the new age is that men will find their most effective weapon in eloquent expression. That is, with the advance of science and technology and the resulting emergence of mass communication, men will strive to make others accept their ideas through dialogue. Thus, the struggle between truth and falsehood, belief and unbelief, will be for the most part a battle for hearts and minds, a battle of persuasion between competing ideas.

The idea that the contemporary jihad is not a war fought with arms is well expressed in the following extract from the Damascus Sermon: ‘All believers are charged with upholding the Word of God and at this time the most effective means of doing this is material progress. For the Europeans are crushing us under their tyranny with the weapons of science and industry. We shall therefore wage jihad with the weapons of science and industry on ignorance, poverty, and conflicting ideas, the worst enemies of upholding the Word of God. As for the external jihad, we shall refer it to the decisive proofs of the Illustrious Shari’a. For conquering the civilized is through persuasion, not through force as though they were savages who understand nothing’ (The Damascus Sermon: 78)<sup>89</sup>.

In this passage Said Nursi distinguishes between jihad to be conducted inside the nation and jihad to be conducted outside the nation. In the first case, jihad has to be carried against what he considered to be the internal, essential enemies of Islam in the historical era when he wrote – ignorance, poverty and conflict (among Muslims) – which are to be defeated through material progress and education. However, Bediüzzaman’s proposal that jihad should be adapted to modern times should not make us think that he was in any way opposed to physical jihad. When conditions demand it, that is, in the face of external aggression, Said Nursi considers armed jihad to be the holy duty of Muslims, in a view that portrays physical jihad eminently as the defence of national territory conducive to martyrdom.

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<sup>89</sup> Quotation also reported in Volkan N. 70, 11 March 1909.

In the case of jihad to be conducted outside the nation that is, against the unbelievers, reasoned arguments and persuasion are the most effective tools. This new form of jihad, which stands in opposition to the way the struggle against non-Muslims was conducted in the previous era, is elucidated in the following extract from the Risale: ‘In the past, Islam’s progress occurred through smashing the enemy’s bigotry and obstinacy and through defense against their aggression; through weapons and the sword. Whereas in the future, in place of weapons, the immaterial, moral sword of true civilization, material progress and truth and justice will defeat and scatter the enemies’ (The Damascus Sermon: 37-38).

Bediüzzaman called the struggle for conquering the hearts of the unbelievers, ‘*manevi cihad*’, which literally means ‘spiritual jihad’ and which is usually translated as ‘non-physical jihad’, ‘jihad of the word’ or ‘moral jihad’. Making reference to the Quranic verse ‘Let there be no compulsion in religion’ (Q. 2:265), he states: ‘By the matters of religion being separated from those of this world on that date [the date of the foundation of Turkish Republic], freedom of conscience, which is opposed to force and compulsion in religion and to religious struggle and armed jihad for religion, was accepted as a fundamental rule and political principle by governments, and this State became a secular Republic. In view of this, jihad will be a non-physical jihad with the sword of certain, verified belief (*iman-i tahkikî*). Because it shows a flash of miraculousness indicating that a light will emerge from the Quran which will make known and set forth clearly proofs so powerful that they will demonstrate almost visibly the guidance and truths of religion. [...] a great hero in the context of the *manevi* jihad [...] is the Risale-i Nur, which bears the name of light. For its immaterial sword has solved hundreds of the mysteries of religion, leaving no need for physical sword’ (The Rays: 290).

Thus, the means to pursue the spiritual jihad against the unbeliever (both within and outside the nation) are ‘certain, verified beliefs’ and the ‘immaterial sword’ of the Risale-i Nur, with whom Nur students attempt to convince their interlocutors and to bring them to the truths of Islam (Al-Kattani, 1995). Such an interpretation gives rise in Nur student’s imaginary to a notion of jihad which basically equates to proselytising and partially overlaps with *hizmet* (see Chapter 3): in this light the daily attempts to spread the Risale in society are in effect a constant practice of jihad.

#### 4.17 Positive action

Another concept that holds a central place in Nursi students' socio-political imaginary is that of 'positive action' (*müsbet hareket*). Nursi uses the term 'positive action' to describe the kind of attitude that is needed in order to maintain social peace and achieve the ultimate goal of the Risale that is, the creation of a harmonious and healthy society through the renewal of the faith. In the Risale positive action is the opposite of 'negative action' (*menfi hareket*), which is the behaviour conducive to social tensions and instability. According to Başar, the literal meaning of the word for positive – *müsbet* – is 'established', 'proved', 'affirmed'. In the way it is used in the Risale it bears also the connotation of 'repairing' or 'constructive'. Instead the word for negative – *menfi* – means literally 'expelled', 'banished' and 'denied'. In the connotation given to it by Nursi it also assumes the meaning of 'destructive' (Başar, 1995: 149).

Positive action is for Nursi the code of conduct his followers should have and it is still today the kind of social engagement Nur students aspire to and the ideal principle that shapes their hizmet. The last time Nursi met with his followers before his death he advised them explicitly about positive action. He said: 'Our duty is positive action, not negative action. It is purely to carry out the service to belief in accordance with Divine pleasure, and not to interfere in God's duty. We are charged to respond with thanks and patience to every difficulty with the positive service to belief which preserves public order and security' (Emirdag Lahikası: 241; cited in Dilek, 128). Thus, for Nursi maintaining public security is always positive, whereas fomenting conflict and differences, and disturbing public order represent negative actions. Similarly, to serve the cause of the faith is positive, while to work for unbelief and immortality is negative, patience and thanks are positive, whereas impatience and rebellion are negative.

Within the theological architecture the principle of positive action derives from the laws of nature, as well as from the laws of destiny. A community member pointed out the link between positive action and the laws of nature during a *sohbet*. She explained: 'People in their social life have to behave according to the laws created by God to govern the Universe. One of these laws is the "principle of slow motion" (*teenni kanunu*). According to this principle, nothing in nature happens all of a sudden, for everything there is a process. Our Lord in His immense Wisdom for the coming into existence of something set up precise laws that have to follow each other in the order He decided, like the steps of a long staircase. For example a

tree does not come from nothing all of a sudden. First a seed is put into the ground, then water is added, then time needs to pass, then the seed grows into a tree, the tree blossoms, it gives fruits and those fruits give seeds for a new tree. All of this happens in a precise order that cannot be inverted. People also have to follow the principle of slow motion if they want to be successful: they have to work hard, be patient, and wait without rushing results. This is the meaning of positive action. It is the same for the state, its laws have to be adequate to the laws of nature. Bediüzzaman says that the state is like a child, its growth is progressive. It means it cannot be changed all of the sudden in a process that is not natural'<sup>90</sup>.

Concerning the connection between destiny and positive action, one interviewee explained: 'The thought of the *Jabrīya* was created by the Omayyad to legitimise their tyranny. They made people think that whatever happened to them was the destiny Allah had chosen for them, so that the population would not react to the oppression of the state. A person that has a *Jabrīya*-style vision of destiny tends to passively accept everything. A person that has a *Mu'tazila*-style vision of destiny, instead, tends to be authoritarian, in the sense that he tends to impose his will on others. From the perspective of social life he will be a revolutionary, he will think "let's change this, let's destroy that". It was like this in the past and it is like this in the present. For example, when we look at the radical Islamist movements, we see that on the issue of the destiny they adopt a *Mu'tazila* perspective'<sup>91</sup>. Said Nursi's approach to destiny, instead, at the horizontal level brings about consultation and common action among believers, whereas at the vertical level it generates commitment to the command of Allah. *Mu'tazila* engenders people to dominate over others; *Jabrīya* engenders people to submit to the dominant classes; the partial will (*cüz-i irade*) approach, instead, prompts people to think that they are equal and have to consult among each other. In this way people do not rule over each other, neither do they submit to each other. Having this approach means also having a pluralist mind-set and thinking that differences have to be integrated within the community. When you have such a mind-set you react to injustice and to state repression with positive action, that is, with "neither obedience nor revolution" (*ne itaat ne de isyan*)' (Inpist02).

The idea that the motto 'neither obedience nor revolution' exemplifies the appropriate reaction to state repression is very strong among community members. Throughout the Risale, especially in the letters, Nursi frequently invites his followers to consider hardship in this life

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<sup>90</sup> A Meşveret *sohbet* in Erzurum, May 2013.

<sup>91</sup> This view is echoed, for example, by Muhammad Ammara, an Egyptian scholar who, in his book entitled 'Mu'tazila and Revolution', traces the history of the foundation of the Mu'tazila school of thought and invites the readers to adopt a Mu'tazila perspective and undertake revolutionary actions (Ammara, 1988).

as a Divine favour and to respond to persecution and oppression with positive action, which requires patience and compassion. Besides an emphasis on peaceful and benevolent behaviour, in the Risale it is not stated what kinds of action fall in concrete terms into the category of positive action. While there is a clear rejection of the use of violence, the idea of positive action as a service to belief is in effect formulated in vague terms, thus being open to different interpretations. The concept is flexible enough to accommodate different kinds of social activism and different degrees of involvement with politics. Positive action is thus an important element of the ideational resources that allow members of the Nur Community to ‘play politics without doing politics’, a practice which will be the object of the next chapter.

#### **4.18 Conclusions**

Nursi gives a social dimension to theology, in the sense that he is very much concerned with the relevance of theology for the social life of men. In his work he aims at charting a new, religiously grounded way in the life of human society and at making this new path accessible to common people. In the search for Islamic modes of social cohesion apt to the modern era he uses a holistic approach that connects the natural world, the sphere of the individual, and the social realm. The result is a normative theory of society and politics that draws socio-political rules from the laws of the universe and from the names of Allah and that moulds the interactions among men on the original, primary relationship between man and his Lord.

With the objective of reconstructing the socio-political imaginary elicited from Nursi’s political theology I have followed the cognitive trajectories that go from the universe to the human soul, from theological foundations to political prescriptions, from the fight against self-pride to the support for democratic procedures, and from destiny to social action. I will here try to recap, in a brief synthesis, these lines of argumentation. What makes man different from any other being in the universe is his ready acceptance of the trust offered by God. Thanks to his positive response to God man receives the ‘I’, that is, the conscience. This faculty is a talisman-like key through which human beings are able to know God, by way of comparison with their imaginary ownership and dominicality. While comprehending thanks to his intellect the infinity and the eternity of God, man also understands that everything in the universe is nothing but a sign of Allah and that his human features and capabilities are only nominal, that is, devoid of real substance. Once he grasps his finitude, he completely submits to God, accepting no other authority than His. It is this act of total submission that ensures

freedom and equality among men because only if men recognise God as their one and only Lord will they have the humility to treat others as equals and the strength to reject compulsion and domination generated by other men. From a political point of view, this outlook translates into the need to establish democracy, as the latter is the only form of government that, by avoiding the supremacy of men over men, does not deny God's authority. Together with the 'I' comes the free will, which, in turn, brings with itself responsibility. The correct use of free will consists in deliberately choosing the good path already prepared by Divine destiny, in a view that attributes to man accountability for his sin, but does not grant him credit for his good actions. This theory of destiny, on the one hand, prevents men from attributing to themselves abilities that, in fact, belong to God and, on the other hand, makes humans responsible for achieving their collective destiny, which is freedom and democracy. Building a democratic Republic is then a theological need to which every believer has to participate actively. Since this Republic is founded on the will of God, it has to respect God's commands, which means it has to enforce shari'a law. Muslims' duty, then, is to work within society to spread the word of Allah. This call to Islam has the aim of triggering a virtuous process according to which people become consciously religious, understand the importance of constructing and respecting democracy and, through democratic means, pushes for the implementation of shari'a. Such a development will take place slowly and progressively because it is established by God in the natural laws that changes occur through gradual and specifically ordered steps.

While investigating the socio-political imaginary summarised above, the chapter also emphasises two points that are relevant for the contemporary debate about Islamism. The first is that Nursi did not write the Risale only to protect Islam against the secularisation process unfolding during the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic. His aim was to reaffirm the doctrines of Islam vis-à-vis atheist and rationalist philosophies that claimed a monopoly over modernity, and, at the same time, to give common Muslims cognitive instruments to fight back against the attacks of the latter. Nursi's critique of materialist philosophy and his emphasis on logical proofs to Divine truths need to be evaluated in this perspective. His political theology clearly shows that alternative modernities are not simply the adaptation to modernity of religious and cultural traditions different from the secular-western one, but are complex systems of meanings and practices sustained by alternative, equally valid, rationalities.

The second is that, in Nur students' view, democracy is the necessary outcome of true faith and democratic means are the only legitimate path to reach complete Islamization of state and society. It is so because the holistic nature of Divine law and the Quranic injunction against self-pride make no other road possible. 'Playing by the rules of the game,' then, is not – in the case of the Nur community – an act of dissimulation, as claimed by some observers of political Islam, but a genuine endorsement of democratic procedural rationality. Moreover, democracy is not advocated *despite* the fact the Islam is an all-encompassing system that requires the complete submission of the believer to Allah, but *precisely because* Islam is that. This act of submission – intended not just as respect of the will of God, but also as the recognition of man's finitude, contingency, and impotence before God – is the *sine qua non* condition of good citizenship. In this perspective, the ethical training of the soul is a spiritual exercise whose final product is the practice of civic virtues.



## Chapter 5

### **Playing politics without doing politics: cooperation with state institutions and consultation with government representatives**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

One evening, during my fieldwork, I was invited to the Istanbul district of Darica, to have dinner and spend the night in the house of a woman belonging to the Yeni Nesil subgroup within the Nur community. There, a group of women would have gathered together in order to read the Risale and reflect upon faith all night long, until the *fajr* prayer (prayer to be performed before the sunrise). Since she knew English, the owner of the house had, within the group she was part of, the task of introducing and explaining the Risale to foreigners. Hence the particular interest she had in me. Sitting on her couch, while waiting for the other guests to arrive, she showed me the ‘memory box of her hizmet’: a box full of photographs, airplane tickets, leaflets, postcards and letters collected over the 22 years she had spent ‘serving the Risale’. While she was walking me through her memories, a document caught my attention. It was a letter from 10 Downing Street, London, dated December 19<sup>th</sup> 2001. The letter said: ‘Dear Mrs [...] The Prime Minister has asked me to thank you for your recent letter. Mr. Blair is thankful to you for letting him have your views which he was interested to see’. In the box there were two other letters from the office of the British Prime Minister dated 2003 and 2004 and the print out of an e-mail from the White House, dated 2001. To these letters was attached a small hand written note by Fırıncı Abi, who complimented my informant on her correspondence with Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George W. Bush, ‘carried out in the name of the Risale and for the sake of belief’. My informant explained to me that after 9/11 she decided to write to Bush and Blair to clarify that true Islam was peaceful and friendly towards non-Muslims and to make a point against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Together with the letters, she had sent to Tony Blair the English translation of some extracts from the Risale that would corroborate her views and some personal pictures that would testify friendships between Muslims and non-Muslims.

This story shows the absolute belief Nur students have in the power of the Risale to transform people’s minds, including the minds of politicians and hence influence politics, in this case even international politics, in an indirect but effective way. The fact that a community member in a non-elite position would take such initiative demonstrates that the idea of gently

advising those in power without directly entering the political field, which has been a strong tenet among the community leadership since the 1950s, has percolated down to the grassroots level. The woman's correspondence represents an isolated, independent, grassroots attempt to do what, at an elite level, has been done by the community in a systematic and organic way since the first democratic election of the Turkish Republic namely, establishing with politicians connections which would lead to consultations between community members and government representatives.

I call this kind of engagement with governing parties 'politics of consultation'. It consists in developing friendly ties with government representatives and exchanging opinions on relevant issues on an ad hoc basis. By relying on it, the community does not aim at obtaining political power, but aims at giving a direction to political power. While, on the one hand, the rationale behind the politics of consultation is rooted in the teachings of the Risale, on the other hand the narrative about politics built by the cemaat represents a form of adaptation of the discourse to the practice. Both in the narrative internally propagated during *sohbets* and in the accounts aimed at the outside it is stated that the community shies away from politics and rejects the 'infiltration of the state'. This stance derives from two elements of the Risale: Nursi's advice to his students to stay away from politics and the idea, underlined in the previous chapter, that the route to the foundation of an Islamic state is not the penetration into the political system, but the development of a fully Islamic society. However, despite its official posture of non-involvement with politics, the community, in fact, pursue a politics of presence and influence and has a clear political agenda made up of two steps: in the long term the movement aims at cultivating ties with the state apparatus in order to have an impact on them, whereas in the short term it supports given political parties that can help it to reach the higher aim of influencing the state. While carrying out this double-layered political project the community maintains a low profile and avoid excessive public exposition, an attitude that constitutes one of the many legacies left by the persecution Nur students experienced during the first decades of the Turkish Republic. The community's discourse about politics reflects this complex approach to political power and accounts for it to the eyes of its grass-roots members. Such a narrative results from the combination of a cognitive activity (the collective reading of the Risale) with a practical activity (the collaboration with state institutions and the consultation with political parties) and shows that, as Taylor emphasises, in the formation of social imaginaries the practice and the understanding are complementary and mutually influenced.

In order to highlight the theoretical-practical line that connects the principles of the Risale with state-community collaboration and with politics of consultation, in this chapter I explore the following: the notions in the Risale-i Nur about the art of politics and its injunction against political engagement; the cognitive tools employed by the community to justify Nur students' de facto political involvement; the cooperation between state institutions and community institutions; and, the political alliance established by the leadership of the community with the ruling JDP through the politics of consultation, an alliance that, over the last years, has granted to the community multiple opportunities of collaboration with the state. While in the first part of the chapter I still deal with the formation and interiorisation, through *sohbets*, of a peculiar socio-political imaginary, in the second part I look at the actualisation of this imaginary – that is, its transformation into practice. However, it is important to keep in mind, that, as underlined above, the formation of the imaginary is in itself shaped by practice. Finally, to give a complete and precise account of the different political positions taken within the cemaat, I look at the ideas and perceptions of community subgroups that do not support the JDP nor collaborate with the party.

## 5.2 Arguing against political involvement

Safa Mürsel explains that Said Nursi regarded opposition (*muhalefet*) as an integral part of democracy. As the author emphasises, Said Nursi, considering his own ideas and beliefs as an example of social opposition, stated throughout the Risale that governments cannot count as a crime the opposition to injustice, oppression and illegality, because opposition is an element of legitimate and genuine justice. According to the principles of the Risale, Mürsel argues, the right to opposition needs to be exercised within the limits of the law and without interfering with public order. When exercised properly, this right cannot be denied by governments, whose role is to 'look at citizens' hands, not at their hearts' (*hukumet ele bakar, kalbe bakmaz*)<sup>92</sup> (Mürsel, 2010:260-261).

This idea that government might interfere with citizens' actions, but cannot interfere with their ideas, is often used by Nur students to point out how unjust the imprisonment of community members in the past was and how their opposition to strict secularism had been legitimate. As one interviewee claimed: 'All governments have or have had opponents who

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<sup>92</sup> This expression is found in The Rays: 373 and in Kastamonu Lahikası: 207.

do not or did not obstruct government and public order. For example, the Christians who were under the Caliph Umar's rule (May God be pleased with him) were not interfered with, although they rejected the law of the Shari'a and the Quran. According to the principles of freedom of thought and conscience, citizens who do not accept the regime act rightly and legally, as long as they do not disturb the governing activities. Unfortunately in this country not everybody agrees with this. Here everybody who does not agree with certain ideas is considered a criminal. How can it be a crime not to endorse the principles on which the Turkish Republic was founded? How can it be a crime not to love Atatürk?' (YAIst01).

In the Risale, while opposition to governments is considered a legitimate action for Nur students, being involved in politics is not. Political participation is seen indeed as something that would corrupt belief. In Nursi's writing it is often emphasised that it is very difficult to reconcile acting sincerely solely for God's sake, with making some arrangements with a professional political group and supporting it. This is because such support would require the lack of objections to the many deviations and sins that are committed by the group.

Here once again, the model for action is set, on the one hand, by the Risale; on the other hand, by Said Nursi's behaviour and choices during his lifetime. Nur students often recall that during the years of the First Said, Beddiuzzaman was involved in politics because those years were dominated by a very vibrant political atmosphere, and it is in that atmosphere that he was compelled to pursue Islamic activities. Thus, he used the same means (i.e. politics) other actors were using, in order to counter their political stratagems and designs against religion. When the Old Said turned into the New Said, the feeling of sincerity gained strength in his soul and he did not anymore accept things, like politics, that could harm his sincere turning to God. Having learnt from his past experiences the negative effects of political involvement, in this new phase of his life he concentrated all of his efforts on saving belief and gaining God's approval.

During *sohbets* community members are often warned against the dangers inherent in political activities and are advised against taking part in it. This stance is substantiated by four reasons: involvement with politics might threaten the Muslims' sincerity of belief; it might destroy the brotherhood among believers; it might hinder the attainment of pure justice; it might lead to an instrumental use of religion.

First of all, politics is an obstacle to the sincerity of the soul. During a *sohbet* the following passage from the Risale was read: 'The most important reason for my lack of interest [for

politics] is this: sincerity, the most important principle of our way, [i.e. the method of the Risale-i Nur] prevents me from doing it. It has become difficult at this time of partisan conflicts between the [political] currents to preserve the true meaning of sincerity and not exploit religion for the word. The best solution is to rely on Divine grace and assistance, rather than on the strengths of the [political] currents' (Emirdağ Lahikası: 38).

As usual, the reading was complemented by a comment: 'Our duty is to act to praise God, for the love of God, and with the absolute sincerity of intentions. Once, Imam Ali – May God be pleased with him – threw an unbeliever to the ground. As he drew his sword to kill him, the unbeliever spat in his face. He released him without killing him. The unbeliever said: "Why did you not kill me? He replied: "I was going to kill you for the sake of God, but when you spat at me I became angered and the purity of my intention was clouded by the inclination of my soul. It is for this reason that I did not kill you". The unbeliever replied: "If your religion is so pure and disinterested, it must be truth"<sup>93</sup>. My dear friends, if a simple spit was able to spoil the good intentions of Imam Ali, whose soul was so pure and perfect, what is politics going to do to the candour of our hearts, which are so imperfect compared to the heart of Ali? It is impossible to maintain truthfulness and honesty when you enter a field like politics, which is full of viciousness and hypocrisy; and that is why, for the love of God, we have to stay away from it'.

During the same *sohbet*, once the reading was over a final comment was added by a senior Nur student in the audience: 'Is it possible for those carried away by political currents, who take up their places besides supporters and strive against opponents, to show the same compassion and love to everyone and to feel the same concern for everyone? Certainly not, and this is not compatible with Islam. The cause of Islam shows its effects through the rays of sincerity and compassion towards all people. In this way, it spreads to all men, reaches out to all minds and hearts. It was thanks to his unambiguous position that Bediüzzaman was able to offer advice and instruction to everyone, from Mustafa Kemal, the members of the National Assembly and other rulers and leaders, to all people; he allowed nothing to taint the purity of his aims'<sup>94</sup>.

Politics is thus the cause of the lack of unity among Muslims, as it creates partisanship and opposition among people who should be brothers in their faith. Said Nursi sees unity among

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<sup>93</sup> This story is reported by Said Nursi in The Letters, 313.

<sup>94</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet* in Istanbul, May 2012

believers as a weapon against the front of the unbelief and considers political currents as a trap set by foreigners and atheists, to which Muslims might fall prey. He states: ‘Beware, do not let worldly currents, and particularly political currents which look to outside the country, sow discord among you. Do not let the parties of misguidance unified before you cast you into confusion. Do not let the satanic principle of “love for the sake of politics, enmity for the sake of politics” take the place of the principle of the Most Merciful, “Love for God’s sake, enmity for God’s sake”. Do not agree on the tyranny of displaying hatred for your brother and love and support for a satanic political colleague, and so in effect share his crime’ (Official Biography of Said Nursi Part Two: 338-339).

During a *sohbet* the topics of politics and brotherhood among believers were covered through the study of the Twenty-Second Letter. The woman who was leading the *sohbet* that day read: ‘When you know your ways and opinions to be true, you have the right to say, “My way is right and the best”. But you do not have the right to say “Only my way is right” [...] It is your right that all that you say should be true but not that you should say all that is true. For one of insincere intention may sometimes take unkindly to advice, and react against it unfavourably’ (The Letters: 309). At this point she stopped reading for an explanation: ‘What Beddiuzzaman is saying here is that we have the right to think that our way [i.e. our interpretation of Islam] is the best way but we do not have the right to think that somebody else’s way is wrong. This means we cannot accuse a brother [i.e. another Muslim] of unbelief because his ideas differ from ours. This is very important in order to preserve Islamic unity. Now, respect from our brothers’ ideas cannot be achieved if we do not stay away from politics. When you are involved in a political current, you are forced, in order to defeat your adversary, to present your ideas as the only valuable and truthful ones. You also have to accuse your opponents of falsehood, even if they are Muslims as well. Just like Beddiuzzaman did when he turned into the New Said, and just like he advises us to do, we have to leave the job of politics to politicians and concentrate on serving the faith’.

As the *sohbet* went on, the following statement by Said Nursi was read with great emphasis: ‘I saw once, as a result of biased partisanship, a pious scholar of religion who went so far in his condemnation of another scholar, with whose political opinions he disagreed, as to imply that he was an unbeliever. He also praised with respect a disbeliever who shared his own opinion. I was appalled at this evil result of political involvement. I said: “I take refuge in God from Satan and politics” and from that time on withdrew from politics’ (The Letters: 311-312). While the passage was read, the women in the audience shook their heads in

astonishment, clicked their tongues and whispered disapprovingly. The woman reading paused and gave an invocation to God to protect the community from the tragic consequences of politics: ‘My dear friends, let us pray to God that such a terrible disease never infects us or our community’. A resounding ‘Amen’ from the crowd followed<sup>95</sup>.

The same topic was addressed by an old, knowledgeable, woman during another *sohbet*. She claimed: ‘It is contrary to Sunni beliefs and a great crime to hastily accuse a sinful believer of disbelief and expel him from the fold of Islam. According to the Sunni view, those who commit serious sins are not unbelievers. Dispute over this matter between the Sunni scholars and the Kharijite and Mu‘tazilite scholars continued for centuries. The Kharijites claimed that those who committed grievous sins were unbelievers and would remain in Hell forever, while the Mu‘tazilite said that those who committed grievous sins were neither believers nor unbelievers but were between the two. Both groups deviated from the truth and fell into misguidance. In recent times, to accuse of disbelief became fashionable again. But, this time, it is not done by the Kharijites or the Mu‘tazilites, it is done by politicians. In fact, they do not really know what disbelief means, they have just memorised some slogans and use them against their political opponents’<sup>96</sup>.

Furthermore, in his evaluation of political involvement, Nursi writes against what he considers to be the fundamental law of human politics: individuals might be sacrificed for the good of the community. According to Nursi, having no specified limit, this man-made fundamental law has paved the way for numerous abuses to occur. An interviewee explained this point: ‘Politics works in a way which is contrary to the Quranic verse: “No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another” (Q. 6:164), which expresses the pure justice of the Divine Law. Beddiuzzaman says: let us suppose that you were on a ship, or in a house, with nine innocent people and one criminal. If someone were to try to make the ship sink, or to set the house on fire, because of that criminal, you know how great a sinner he would be. You would cry out to the heavens against his sinfulness. Even if there were one innocent man and nine criminals aboard the ship, it would be against all rules of justice to sink it. Since politics is a material struggle, and since our era is dominated by tyranny and despotism, it happens that numerous innocent supporters of a person are crushed because of the mistakes that person made. This is how worldly politics is antithetical to Quranic justice’<sup>97</sup>. Human politics

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<sup>95</sup> A Yeni Nesil *sohbet* in Istanbul, February 2013.

<sup>96</sup> A *sohbet* in Isparta, April 2013

<sup>97</sup> These ideas can be found in The Rays: 384 and The Letters: 306-308.

conflicts also with the following verse: “On that account, We ordained for the Children of Israel that if anyone slew a person – unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – it would be as if he had slew the whole people; and if anyone saves a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people” (Q. 5:32). When those calling to the way of God become involved in political movements, they have to accept the predominant law of human politics and therefore have to close their eyes to a series of evils, and even to draw up plans for them. They have to condone the injustice that the innocent and the vulnerable people will be exposed to.’

Finally, according to the Risale politics brings with itself the exploitation of religion. Said Nursi explains: ‘The three supreme matters in the worlds of humanity and Islam are belief, the Shari’a and life. Since the truths of belief are the greatest of these, the Risale-I Nur’s select and loyal students avoid politics with abhorrence so that they should not be made the tool of other currents and subject to other forces, and those diamond-like Quranic truths not reduced to fragments of glass in the view of those who sell or exploit religion for the world, and so that they can carry out to the letter the duty of saving belief, the greatest of all duties’ (Official biography of Said Nursi, Part Two: 339). This view is echoed by community members who often repeat it during informal conversations when explaining their stance toward politics: ‘Religion cannot be made a tool of politics (*din siyasete alet olmaz*)’.

Here it is important to make clear that the Risale injunction against taking part in political currents does not translate into a view of religion and politics as two separate fields of human existence, with no interrelation. Nor does it reduce religion to a private relation between God and the believer. The notion of Islam as an all-encompassing system to which, as seen in the previous chapter, Nur students abide, makes such a position untenable. Muhammad Sa’id Ramadan al-Buti, a Syrian scholar who had a close relationship with the community, addressed the issue of the relationship between religion and politics during a symposium on Said Nursi’s thought: ‘Some people think in the following way about [...] Bediüzzaman’s attitude, that we are calling on people to think of Islam as an abstract relation between man and his Maker, comprising various acts of worship. According to such a view, Islam has no connection with government and political matters; it should not be regarded as religion and state, but as a religion confined to the mosque and places of worship, apart from society and social systems. But we have insisted on the opposite of this and continue to do so’ (Al-Buti, 1995).



If Islam has in fact connections with political matters, why should Nur students stay away from politics? How can the vision of Islam as ‘religion and state’ be reconciled with the instructions against political involvement? Al-Buti himself provided an answer in his speech: ‘Besides being in error, this view [the idea that the injunction against political participation translates into the separation of religion and state] stems from misunderstanding Islam and not knowing the difference between the way that takes people to Islam and the essence that constitutes Islam. [...] The way that will lead to the spread of Islam and the expansion of its power should remain aloof from the intrigues of politics and political currents, as Bediüzzaman always stressed. [...] The essence of Islam, which we try to persuade people to believe and practice, consists of all the principles and rulings laid down by God’s Book and His Prophet’s Sunna. These principles and injunctions are characterised by ordering both the personal life of people and their relations with their fellow men; supervising the law and order of the family; setting up Islamic society as a whole; ordering the laws within it; establishing sound human relations between rules and ruled; and setting up the bases of consultation between governors and governed within the harmony of the revealed injunctions to support good and restrain from evil. [...] the comprehensive establishment of the edifice of Islam and the performance of the sincere *da‘wa*, are tied to making God’s religion known in its full meaning, and making people love it truly. For this reason, not getting carried away by the attractions of politics, or getting involved in it or joining some groups to the exclusion of others are important things. The only possibility of founding a broad, firm Islamic structure which embraces the benefits of both this world and the hereafter and meets all needs, individual, social and political is by [...] applying that method [Bediüzzaman’s method]’.

Here al-Buti makes an important distinction between the method of *da‘wa* and the content of Islam. Those who take on the responsibility of spreading the message of Islam should do so *supra partes*, not because Islam has nothing to do with politics, but because Islam is a universal religion that should be delivered to everybody, regardless of their political attitudes. Thus, avoiding politics (intended as human competition between antagonist factions to hold government positions) is the best way to convey to as many people as possible a message that contains in itself politics (this time intended as the divinely prescribed rules for the government among people).

### 5.3 Justifying de facto political involvement

Despite the warnings against political engagement, Nur students have cooperated in the past and continue to cooperate in the present with political parties, both at grassroots level and as parliament representatives or local governors elected for the parties. In order to solve this paradox, Nur students carry on an operation of adjustment of the discourse to practice. Thus, two cognitive tools are elaborated and used to justify the de facto involvement of the community into politics: the distinction between passive and active politics, and the distinction between the collective personality (*şahs-i manevî*) and the individual (*fert*), analysed in Chapter 3.

In an article about the relationship of Nur students with politics, Alaaddin Başar recalls the answer that Mehmet Kırkıncı gave during a lesson to the accusation directed at Nur students of being politically passive. Mehemet Kırkıncı described a storm that hit the sea shore with violence and destroyed the nice houses on the coast and added ‘you can define this action as active, but the results of this action are full of negativity; you can define as passive the action of a fruit tree that stands silently on the ground and works without hurting anybody and gently offers its fruits to the needy ones, but do not forget that we feed ourselves with the bounties of this passivity’. In another lesson, Mehmet Kırkıncı is said to have claimed: ‘Would you define as passive the action of the sun that without breaking the glasses of our windows enters into our houses and illuminate us?’ Başar explains the meaning of these words by underling the Nur students do not look at the violence or speed of an action, but at the magnitude and utility of its results (Başar, 2011).

Members of the community also claim that there are two ways to be in charge of the government of a country: through democracy, or through revolutions. In the first case people are compelled to create propaganda for their own party and to denigrate with lies and calumnies the opponent parties. In the second case people impose their ideas by using the force, without gaining the heart of their fellow countrymen. Since both of these two options have negatives results, Nur students stay away from active politics and use instead a different method: they concentrate their efforts not on the state and the government, but on the nation and the individual. They do not aim at controlling the state, but at giving a direction to people by appealing to their hearts and their minds. For this aim, they might sometimes resort to passive politics. The sound of a slap or the sound of a gun are classified as active action,

whereas the silent actions that are effective in the heart and in the mind of people are classified as passive (YNIst01; YNIst07; YAIst 06; YAIst10; Başar, 2011).

This abstract distinction between passive and active politics, which recurred often in the informal conversations I had with Nur students, was made clear in practical terms, by one of my interviewees, a young student of law who participated in the preparation of the Constitution draft presented to the Turkish Parliament by the Yeni Nesil group. When I asked him whether giving Parliament representatives suggestions about the content of a new Constitution on the behalf of the Nur Community was not an infringement of Nursi's recommendation to his students to stay away from politics, he gave me the following answer: 'There are two ways of doing politics: you can do politics actively, or you can do politics passively. Active politics means taking part in political violence, founding a political party, running for the elections or working for electoral campaigns. Passive politics means making your voice heard without violence and putting pressure on governments for the sake of religion. Said Nursi never advised his students against passive politics. Presenting some ideas about a new Constitution to the Parliament is an act of passive politics and it is not contrary to Nursi's teachings'.

The idea of passive politics was also used by a small group of young female community members who participated in the meeting held by Erdoğan in the Istanbul district of Kazlıçeşme on June 16<sup>th</sup> 2013, in response to the protests, initiated by the Gezi movement, that at that time was flaring up across the country. When I asked whether going to the meeting signified political involvement, the group explained that a meeting was different from a protest in that it was convened within the limits of legality, it was meant to cause no harm to anybody and it was aimed at expressing support and love for the nation. Going to a meeting once in a while – they added – was also different from being occupied with political activities on a daily basis. Also, going to a meeting was nothing like protesting in the street or being an activist in a party, both considered examples of active politics. It was rather an act of passive politics and hence acceptable according to the teaching of the Risale.

To recap, the idea of passive actions, which intermingles and overlaps with that of the positive action discussed in the previous chapter, flows into the concept of passive politics. The reasoning brings to the conclusion that active politics equates to acting negatively, while passive politics equates to acting positively. There is no trace of the distinction between active politics and passive politics in the writings of Said Nursi. It seems that this classification was

elaborated by authoritative Nur students in the post-Nursi period, in order to justify, in the eyes of the community, ad hoc political engagement, required not on a daily basis, but in specific socio-political conjunctures.

The justification of community members' candidacy to administrative or political positions, is instead operated through the distinction between the collective personality and the individual. Members of the cemaat – it is claimed – can engage in political activities as individuals and in their names (*fert olarak ve kendi adına*). This engagement can be directed at reaching the social aims of the Risale, or at supporting the spiritual activities organised by the community, but it cannot be carried out in the name of the community (Güleçyüz, 2011: 49).

In other words, members can be involved in politics as representatives of themselves and can aim, through their political engagement, at advocating the community's cause, but they cannot be involved in politics as representatives of the community. This distinction is based on a very delicate balance and dwells, on the one hand, on the ideas that community members, despite being part of a collective personality, maintain their individuality (Chapter 3), and on the other hand, on the recognition that, with the exception of Said Nursi, there were never – nor ever will be – individuals so perfect and faultless to be able to represent the collective personality of the cemaat.

When translated into practice, this view means that Nur students who enter the political field do so without ever making references to the Risale. The words of one interviewee, who was Izmir Parliament Representative for the Right Path Party, clarify this point: 'People should not do politics in the name of the community, but, if they want to serve the nation, they can run for the election in their own names. I decided to be a candidate to improve the laws and regulations of this country in a way that they would fit better the needs and the interests of the people. During the electoral campaigns I printed and distributed brochures in which I explained what I was going to do in case of victory, and neither in the brochures nor in any of my campaign speeches did I make any reference to the Risale-i Nur. I did not even speak about the Risale or the cemaat in Parliament. I was elected as a representative of myself, not as a representative of the community and it is in this spirit that I carried on my duties of Parliament deputy' (YAIzm03)<sup>98</sup>.

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<sup>98</sup> Two deputy Prime Ministers of the current JDP government, Bülent Arınç and Hüseyin Çelik, received their religious education in the Nur dersane during their youth. Still, in their public statements and Parliamentary speeches, they never make references to this affiliation nor to any passage, concept, or idea from the Risale.

In informal conversations and interviews I had with Nur students, they also underlined that one of the reasons why community members have to do politics in their own name is that the mistakes they might make while campaigning for elections or serving as Parliament representatives cannot relapse on the entire community. This means that the political activities of its members, cannot compromise the rightness and faultlessness of the community (YNIst07; YAIst02; MesVan02; IndIst02).

I claim that this preoccupation with the possibility that mistakes of Nur students are ascribed to the entire community has a double function. On the one hand, in a country where part of the public opinion is still hostile to the election of religious communities' members to governing positions – interpreted as attempts to 'conquer the state' – the cemaat tries to protect itself from public accusations that might derive from false steps made in the political field by its adherents. On the other hand, as the cemaat is a 'charismatic community' that assures to its members salvation through membership (see Chapter 3), it necessarily has to maintain purity and perfection and cannot let individual mistakes invalidate its redemptive function.

Finally, besides doing politics in their own names, community members who present their candidacy to the elections, have to resist the temptation to improve their rank by taking advantage of political discords and splits. In one of his books, Kâzım Güleçyüz recalls the advice that used to be given, during the Justice Party era, to community members who intended to take up a political career: 'If you have support among the base of your organisation, enter [the political field]; do not try to advance your career by trusting and relying on the suggestions made by the leadership of the party; do not take sides in the disputes among factions internal to the party; try to utilise well your presence inside the party for the sake of service (*hizmet*); do not let the deceptive appeal of politics and the daily strife make you forget your original purposes' (Güleçyüz, 2011: 81).

Within this framework of doing politics in the name of the individual and without getting caught up in political struggles, the community might ask some of its members to run for the election. One interviewee (YAAnk01) explained that for the political election of 1977 the community, according to the agreement made with the Justice Party, had to provide five Nur students as candidates to run for the Parliament in the ranks of the JP. Since in the previous years the interviewee had been very active in propagating Nursi's ideas and fighting communist and socialist ideologies in the universities, the community chose him as a potential

candidate. At that time he refused because of the Risale's advice to stay away from politics. When the offer to run for Parliament came again in 1991 (this time for the Right Path Party), he felt that at that point his faith was mature enough to tackle the political field in his name, without being backed in his political actions by the community.

At other times, pressure for candidacy might come from the party with whom community members have more or less strong connections. In this case the party aims at attracting votes from the community by inserting in its electoral lists some of its adherents. As one interviewee explained: 'They [members of the Welfare Party] came to me three times in three different towns while I was a public servant and asked me to run for mayor at the local elections, and I for three times said: "No, I won't come. Our aim is not politics, but service to belief". Why did I not accept the offer? Because I was scared that my morality would be ruined. They came a fourth time they told me: "If you do not run for the election we will never forgive you". So I accepted, but imposed a condition. I said: "I will come to Van, we will have a meeting there and I will explain to you my principles. If you accept these principles I will run for mayor; if you do not accept them, I will not accept your offer". Before meeting with them I consulted with friends from the community and they approved my decision, but exhorted me to be very careful not to commit to acts that would darken my soul. I made it clear to the party members that if I worked as a mayor I would not do things that clashed with my conscience, I would not do any string-pulling for anyone, nor would I engage in any *haram* (illicit according to Islam) activity' (MesIst02). Although this story might have been somewhat sugar-coated by the informant, it is relevant in that it shows the 'bargaining process' that occurs between party leaders, community leaders and individual community members before the latter's candidacy to the election.

#### **5.4 Cooperation between community institutions and state institutions**

As stated above, the ultimate aim of the community's political agenda is not to take over the state, but to influence it. Over the last years, thanks to the political alliance established with the JDP, the community has gained privileged access to several state-controlled fields where it cooperates with state institutions in the effort to provide citizens with an Islamic education and to spread religious values in the society. In this section I will present some examples that highlight the form that this state-community collaboration takes. What follows is not intended to be an exhaustive account of all the accords of cooperation between community foundations

and state institutions. A complete report would require a significant amount of time and space, as the accords are not always stipulated at national level and then enforced in the various provinces of the country, but are most of the time stipulated at provincial level between local branches of national state institutions and the Nur foundations or associations existing in the territory. As highlighted in Chapter 3, the *cemaat* as such does not exist from a legal point of view, but it manages to have legal representation through associations and foundations established and managed by community members across the country. These associations and foundations are not instituted at national level, with a centralized structure and provincial branches, but are established at local level. Cooperation with the state, then, takes place through the repetition and re-enactment of the same kind of accords among different local or provincial actors in different parts of the country. Being impossible to gather information on every single accord, I tried, nevertheless, to cover the major areas of collaboration: organisation of cultural activities for citizens and management of public spaces at municipal level; programmes of rehabilitation for convicts in state prisons; extracurricular didactic activities for school-aged children; education of prospective police officers; care of orphans and children under custody; and support to Syrian refugees.

There is a strong collaboration between community members and foundations and JDP-led municipalities. Community members serve as speakers at conferences, meetings, and festivals organised by the municipalities – a duty that they perform without mentioning their affiliation to the *cemaat* and without making references to the Risale. The municipalities, in return, offer to community members the possibility of using public spaces, like historical buildings or cultural centres, to organise their activities. Obviously, for the community being able to use a public space means gaining higher visibility and reaching a wider public. In some cases cooperation becomes more structural and weekly sohbet are organised in buildings or centres belonging to the municipalities, like the Hasan Ali Yücel Cultural Center (*Hasan Ali Yüce Kültür Merkezi*) in Fatih, the Bağlarbaşı Cultural Center (*Bağlarbaşı Kültür Merkezi*) in Üsküdar, or the historical Tribunal of the Sultan Fatih (*Fatih Sultan Mahkemesi*) in Üsküdar, just to mention a few. Finally, cultural/educational activities are sometimes organised at municipal level by community foundations in collaboration with municipalities or state ministries (see for example, appendices B and C).

On October 13<sup>th</sup> 2012, the opening to the public of the restored Rustem Paşa Madrasa (Quranic school) was celebrated with an official ceremony organised by the Municipality of the Istanbul district of Fatih. The Rustem Paşa Madrasa, whose construction was completed in

1551, is an historical building planned by the famous Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan. The restoration of the building was patronised and sponsored by the Directorate for Science and Technology of the Fatih Municipality (*Fatih Belediyesi Fen İşleri Müdürlüğü*) in collaboration with the Istanbul Special Provincial Administration (*İstanbul İl Özel İdaresi*). The building was transferred under the responsibility of the Fatih Municipality from the General Directorate of Foundations (*Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*), a subdivision of the Prime Minister's Office that supervises and manages historical Seljuk and Ottoman foundations and monuments located throughout the national territory. The Fatih Municipality, in turn, after the restoration, devolved the Madrasa to the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture (*İstanbul İlim ve Kültür Vakfı*), an organisation belonging to the Yeni Nesil group, 'with the mission of managing the Quranic school and utilising it to offer cultural activities to the public' (IndIst01). Hasan Suver, JDP deputy major of the Fatih Municipality, who provided information about the legal status of the madrasa, explained to me that people from the community were known and respected by members of the Fatih Municipality Council and that the decision to devolve the building to the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture was based on the commonality of views between the Municipality and the Foundation and on the conviction that the Foundation would have used the madrasa to carry out 'positive' activities from which the population could benefit greatly (IndIst01).

Several public authorities were present at the opening ceremony, included Mustafa Demir, mayor of Fatih; Ahmet Ümit, district governor of Fatih; Avni Mutlu, provincial governor of Istanbul and Bülent Arınç, deputy Prime Minister. During the celebration, Mustafa Demir and Bülent Arınç gave speeches in which they praised the JDP for its invaluable contribution and allocation of resources to the restoration of historical buildings and monuments all over Turkey (see appendix D). The celebration also served as the opening ceremony of the museum dedicated to Said Nursi, built by the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture in one of the rooms of the madrasa. After cutting the ribbon, the public authorities were guided through the museum, which features pages of the Risale handwritten by Said Nursi and some of his belongings, including his tunic, headgear and teapot, as well as a manual copying machine used by early Nur students to secretly multiply copies of the Risale.

After the opening ceremony, in order to publicly express gratitude towards the municipality, the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture hung banners around the neighbourhood to thank the major of Fatih, Mustafa Demir for the restoration (see appendix E). Once the *madrasa* was in its hands, the foundation, which had equipped the building with Ottoman-



style furniture<sup>99</sup>, turned it into a place for the study of the Risale, with a library, work spaces and rooms destined to host sohbet meetings. In addition to *sohbets* for both men and women, the foundation uses the building to organise exhibitions connected to the Risale or the first Nur students, conferences, courses in the Ottoman language and *ifṭār* (break of the fast) dinners during Ramadan<sup>100</sup>.

Besides this more or less formal collaboration with municipalities, several foundations and associations connected to the cemaat across the country have signed protocols of cooperation (*işbirliği protokolleri*) with different state institutions both at national and local level. One of the first agreements was signed with the prison of Diyarbakir for the distribution of books to convicts and the organisation of conferences in the prison (MesGaz03). From there, the practice of signing protocols of cooperation with state institutions extended to other towns and to other fields.

The success of the Diyarbakir prison experience prompted community members of Gaziantep to replicate the experiment in their own town (MesGaz03). In 2012 a protocol was signed between the Association for Healthy Generations (*Sağlıklı Nesiller Derneği*), an institution belonging to the Meşveret group of Gaziantep, and the Gaziantep Department for the Enforcement of Penalties (*Gaziantep Ceza İnfaz Kurumu*) (see appendices Fi and Fii<sup>101</sup>), with the aim of ‘re-integrating prisoners into society’. According to the agreement, the Association, besides contributing to the enrichment of the prison’s library, organises conferences, discussions, and book reading activities, ‘for the purpose of building in prisoners the habit of reading’.

The coordinator of these activities in Gaziantep explained to me that the community members who volunteer to ‘carry out the service in the jails’ are carefully trained before they start the

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<sup>99</sup> Fırıncı Abi explained to me that in the '80s he opened a private school that offered specialised classes for the preparation for college admissions tests (*dershane*). After running the school for a couple of years, he felt that being an entrepreneur clashed with his role as one of the authoritative brothers of the community. So he decided to transfer the ownership of the school to one of the community members, on the condition that he would devolve part of the income to financially support the activities of the community. It was this community member who, still honouring the pact made with Fırıncı Abi around 30 years before, donated furniture for the madrasa (YNIst17).

<sup>100</sup> In a similar vein, the complex of buildings (*külliye*) adjacent to the Koca Sinanpaşa Mosque of Çemberlitaş was allotted to the Service Foundation (*Hizmet Vakfı*), an institution belonging to the Meşveret group within the Nur Community, by the General Directorate of Foundations. The restoration of the complex is being carried out by the Municipality of Fatih in collaboration with the Service Foundation (<http://www.hizmetvakfi.org/hizmet-vakfi-yonetimi-fatih-belediye-baskanini-ziyaret-etti.html>).

<sup>101</sup> All the protocols of cooperation were handed to me by community members, with the exception of the one between the Ministry of Family and Social Policies and the ‘Happy Nest Happy Life’ Association, which was downloaded from the internet. The English versions of the protocols are not official documents, but translations made by the author to help comprehension by non-Turkish speakers.

educational programme. They are taught to respond with compassion and affection to the initially hostile attitude of the convicts towards them. Moreover, they are instructed not to ask prisoners any questions about their past or the crimes they committed, so as to avoid negatively impacting on the communication with them. Finally, they are advised to focus the first conversations with convicts on the positive aspects of being in prison, like the fact that in jail there are fewer temptations and hence fewer chances to commit sins, or the fact that in jail prisoners have lot of free time, which can be used to meditate and reflect about this life and the hereafter. This thoughtful behaviour is directed at making prisoners understand that they should look at prison, not as a misfortune, but as an opportunity to become better citizens (MesGaz03).

The news of the success of the rehabilitation programmes carried out in the prisons of Diyarbakir and Gaziantep quickly spread among community members all over Turkey. Nur students from other areas of the country contacted the Gaziantep team to receive instructions and advice about how to replicate their experiment. As requests for information increased, a small delegation from Gaziantep decided to prepare a power-point seminar and make a tour of Turkey to instruct fellow Nur students in the rest of the country (MesGaz03; MesIsp01). In the power-point presentation, kindly given to me by one of my interviewees, the following were explained: how to approach authorities; how to write legal agreements to be signed with state institutions; how to give lessons; how to train volunteers; what kind of obstacles the volunteers are likely to encounter; and what are the best strategies to distribute books connected with the Risale.

The Meşveret group of Isparta dedicated lots of energy to bringing educational programmes to the prisons of their district, in particular to the prison of Afyon, where Said Nursi himself was detained for several years. In this case, the protocol was signed between the Isparta Foundation for Culture and Education (*İsparta Kültür ve Eğitim Vakfı*) and the Isparta Department for the Enforcement of Penalties (*İsparta Ceza İnfaz Kurumu*), and the project was named 'Education to Values' (*Değerler Eğitimi*). To attract prisoners' attention and encourage them to participate in lessons, volunteers of the Foundation drafted a list of 33 questions that they thought would stimulate convicts' reflections, and distributed copies of it around the prison. The leaflet invited the readers to come to the lessons to hear the answers to the questions posed (see appendix Gi and Gii). Regarding the organisation of the lessons, prisoners were divided into groups, to avoid having people who had animosity towards each other in the same class, and a specific teacher was assigned to each group. (MesIsp01).

The topics officially discussed in the prisons around Isparta from February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013 to August 27<sup>th</sup> 2013 within the framework of the project ‘Education to Values’ were the following: individual and social benefits of the belief in the hereafter; meaning of the Green Crescent; awareness of saving; the victory of Çanakkale; historical awareness; the Holy Birth [of the Prophet Muhammed]; awareness of being an individual; brotherhood; tolerance and mutual help; protection of the environment; hygiene and healthy lifestyle; awareness of earthquakes; integrity and honesty; and the meaning of victory (see appendix H). It is noticeable how the titles of the lessons make no reference at all to the Risale or Said Nursi. Nevertheless, while giving these lessons, community members manage to introduce to the listeners ideas and concepts drawn from the Risale by organically inserting them into the presentation in a way that fits the topic examined.

As mentioned above, educational programmes were extended to other subjects, besides prisoners, such as university students, school-age children, future police officers trained in the Police Academy, and Syrian refugees. A protocol was signed on October 10<sup>th</sup> 2010 between the Hasan Kalyoncu University (*Hasan Kalyoncu Üniversitesi*) of Gaziantep, which is characterised by a strong Nur presence, and the Gaziantep Provincial Directorate of National Education (*Gaziantep İl Milli Eğitim Müdürlüğü*) (see appendixes Ii, Iii, Ji and Jii). The agreement was titled ‘Project for Social Sensitivity’ (*Toplumsal Duyarlılık Projeleri*) and stipulated the organisation by the University of conferences and conversations with elementary school, middle school and high school students, to be held in state schools after regular lessons, with the aim of ‘preparing students for social life and helping them in the choice of a profession’ (*öğrencileri toplumsal hayata hazırlamak ve meslek seçimlerinde yardımcı olmak*). In addition, the agreement called for the distribution to students of books deemed appropriate by the Directorate of National Education, with the aim of ‘building in children the habit of reading’ (*öğrencilere kitap okuma alışkanlığının kazandırılması*).

The topics discussed in schools around Gaziantep between October 15<sup>th</sup> 2012 and May 31<sup>st</sup> 2013, in agreement with the Directorate, were the following: using our skills in a positive way and increasing productivity; love for the Prophet; factors that will ensure and maintain social peace; family, the seed of society and cornerstone of the nation; relation between science and religion; secrets to successful learning; using time in an effective way; perils youths are faced with and proposals of solutions; influence of faith on individual and collective life; culture of living together: looking at differences as richness; belief in the Unity of God and its relation with everyday life; definition of person and elements that make him/her happy; essence and

purpose of a person<sup>102</sup>. Here, again, there were no explicit references to the Risale, but Said Nursi's ideas were, in fact, integrated in the presentations and in the discussions. The lessons were always followed by refreshments of tea, juices, and snacks, which gave community members the opportunity to get to know the students personally. Discussing the above-mentioned topics and building personal relationships with the students functioned as a means to attract the latter to the derslane, first, and to the community later (MesGaz03).

A very similar project was carried out in the Gaziantep Polis Academy, under the invitation of the Director of the Academy himself (MesGaz03). The agreement was signed in March 2013 between the Association for Healthy Generations and the Gaziantep Police Academy (*Gaziantep Polis Meslek Yüksekokulu*), with the aim of 'preparing students for social life and helping them to stay healthy' (*öğrencileri toplumsal hayata hazırlamak ve sağlıklı kalmalarına yardımcı olmak*) (see appendix Ki and Kii). Just like in the case of school-age children, conferences and lessons were organised, books were handed out, and personal relationships with future police officers were built.

Agreements with state institutions were also signed also in the field of management of orphans and children under state custody. In this case, pioneering activities were carried out in Istanbul. On April 5<sup>th</sup> 2010 an association named 'Happy Nest, Happy Life' (*Mutlu Yuva, Mutlu Yaşam Derneği*), belonging to the Meşveret group within the Nur community, was founded 'with the aim of re-settling into society orphans, children in need of custody and children at risk'. The association works to spread the model of children houses situated in apartment complexes, where five to six children can live together. This kind of environment is presented as an improvement of the living conditions of the crowded state dormitories and orphanages, which are usually home for orphans and children in need of protection, under the jurisdiction of the General Directorate for Children's Services (*Çocuk Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü*), a branch of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies (*Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanlığı*). According to the association, the aims of these houses are: to ensure children's participation in life as active individuals; to provide them with the opportunity of living inside society and in a home environment with other children; and to teach them social responsibilities and the importance of respecting one's neighbour (<http://mutluyuva.org/kurumsal/>).

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<sup>102</sup> The document cannot be included as an appendix because it indicates the names and surnames of volunteers.

The association opened children's houses within the legal framework of the protocol of cooperation signed on August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010 with the Istanbul Provincial Directorate of Family and Social Policies (*Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar İstanbul İl Müdürlüğü*). According to the protocol, the Association has the responsibility of renting and furnishing a house adequate to the criteria established by the Directorate. After the Directorate inspects the apartment and gives its approval, children between two and six years old are sent to the house. In each house three female care workers look after children day and night in shifts. The Directorate takes care of the expenditures for the wage and insurance of the care workers. The Association is responsible for the well-being of the children and for their health and educational needs (informative brochure; <http://mutluyuva.org/kurumsal/>).

Thanks to the protocol, the Association was able to open in Istanbul 36 children's houses in total: 12 houses in Başakşehir; 4 in Bayrampaşa; 1 in Fatih; 1 in Bağcılar; 1 in Halkalı; 7 in Ümraniye; 2 in Ataşehir; 1 in Maltepe; 1 in Çekmeköy; 4 in Tuzla; and 2 in Üsküdar (<http://mutluyuva.org/cocuk-evleri/>). On April 13<sup>th</sup> 2012, an expanded version of the protocol signed in Istanbul, was signed in Ankara between the Association and Ministry of Family and Social Policies (*Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanlığı*). This new protocol, being signed directly with the Ministry, gave the Association the possibility to extend its activities beyond the district of Istanbul (see appendices Li and Lii).

According to Article 4.4 of its statute, the Association 'put an effort into organising seminars, courses and all kind of preventive and constructive teaching and learning activities with the aim of protecting national and spiritual values (regarding religion, customs and morality)' (<http://mutluyuva.org/tuzuk/>). This article sets the stage for the organisation of Quranic teaching classes and Risale-i Nur lessons for children. When I visited the Association in Istanbul and toured some of its children's houses, I was told that the care and the education given to the children was intended to help them grow into active individuals within society and responsible citizens. With this aim in mind – I was told – learning activities that covered the basic concepts and values of the Risale were organised for younger children, and general Risale lessons were arranged for older children.

The Association makes sure that the employees that take care of the children are able to give them the desired religious education. In order to be employed in one of the houses run by the association, care workers need to be graduates from pedagogical high schools or they need to have a 'Care Worker Certificate' issued by the Directorate of People's Education (*Halk*

*Eğitim Müdürlüğü*). To train potential workers who meet the criteria required by the association (patience, morality, reliability and good communication skills) but do not have the necessary educational background, the Istanbul branch of the Association signed protocols of cooperation with the Başakşehir and Bayrampaşa Provincial Directorates of People's Education (*Başakşehir ve Bayrampaşa İlçe Halk Eğitim Müdürlükleri*). In compliance with the protocols, during the academic years 2010- 2011 and 2011-2012, the association organised courses to give people interested in working in the children's houses the professional education they needed (informative brochure; <http://mutluyuva.org/kurumsal/>).

Finally, the Association promoted a workshop entitled 'The Future of International Children's Houses and of the Guardian Family System' in collaboration with the Ministry for Family and Social Policies, the Yıldız Technical University and the Municipality of Güngören. The workshop was held on October 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> 2012 at the Yıldız Technical University and saw the participation of 6 NGOs and 11 universities. The discussion covered different topics, from the legal framework for the administration of children's houses and the management of employees, to the role models and spiritual needs of the children. In the report published after the workshop, an emphasis was put on the greater independence that should be granted by law to NGOs in the field of care and services offered to orphans and children under custody. The report claims that the most important measure to be taken is the change to Article 61 of the Turkish Constitution. The current article says: 'The state shall take all kinds of measures for social resettlement of children in need of protection. To achieve these aims the State shall establish the necessary organizations or facilities, or arrange for their establishment'. It is proposed that the article should be changed to the following: 'The state shall take all kinds of measures for social resettlement of children in need of protection, in collaboration with NGOs'. It is also proposed that the job of taking care of children in need of protection is completely passed on to NGOs that have shown competence and reliability in the field; with state institutions taking care only of planning, inspection, and financial support. All the other proposals made in the report are considered transitory solutions to be employed until major changes to the law are passed (Uluslararası Çocuk Evleri ve Koruyucu Aile Sisteminin Geleceği Çalıştayı Sonuç Bildirgesi, accessible at [https://www.mutluyuva.org/docs/calistay\\_sonuc\\_bildirgesi.pdf](https://www.mutluyuva.org/docs/calistay_sonuc_bildirgesi.pdf)).

The last area of cooperation with state institutions explored during the fieldwork was that of the management of the refugees from the Syrian civil war. In an informal way, i.e., without official agreements with state institutions, the community organises Risale lessons with

Syrian refugees. Community members have access, for example, to the refugee camp of Akçakale, a small town near Gaziantep. There, they have distributed, together with essential supplies, hundreds of copies of the Risale. Moreover, they have managed to organise in the refugee camp regular classes for school-age children and Risale reading groups for adults. Community members have also made a very active contribution to an educational project carried out by the Municipality of Şahinbey, a district of Gaziantep. The project aims at giving high school education to 570 young Syrian expatriates, belonging to families who have settled down in the area around Gaziantep outside the refugee camps. The programme started on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013 and is still ongoing. It covers basic school subjects and Turkish language classes. The municipality takes care of the teachers' wages and offers transportation services to the students from their house to the municipality-owned Yaşar Torun Youth Centre (Yaşar Torun Gençlik Merkezi), where lessons are held (<http://www.sahinbey.bel.tr/tr/haber/1/2354/sahinbey-belediyesi-570-suriyeliye-lise-ve-turkce-okuma-yaz.aspx>). The majority of the classes are given in Arabic by Syrian teachers, while Turkish classes are given by Turkish teachers in collaboration with their Syrian colleagues, or with volunteers who speak both Turkish and Arabic and serve as interpreters. Sometimes Risale lessons are given under the general category of 'guidance lessons' (*rehberlik dersleri*), that is, lessons organised with the aim of orientating students in their new lives in Turkey. At other times, they are given in the context of language and translation classes from Turkish into Arabic; in this case sentences from the Risale are used as texts to be translated and from there a discussion about the meaning of the translated sentence is launched.

As already emphasised, the accords of cooperation described are part of the community's political plan of influencing and giving shape to state policies. Besides that, it is important to notice also that the collaboration between the community and JDP-led municipalities or ministries is of mutual benefit for the movement and the party. The JDP (through the municipalities and state institutions that it controls) gives to the cemaat the possibility of extending the scope of its hizmet and reaching people it would not be able to reach if it did not have access to state-controlled fields, like public schools and universities, prisons, orphanages, and refugee camps and settlements. The community, on its part, assists the party in two, interrelated, endeavours. First, the cemaat represents for the JDP a strong ally in its effort to Islamize and 're-Ottomanize', not only the public sphere, but also the cultural life of citizens. The social activities offered by JDP run municipalities are entirely Islam or Ottoman

oriented, thus leaving no space for alternative views or lifestyles. The community represents for the party a pool of knowledgeable, authoritative speakers and experienced Ottoman and Arabic language teachers, on which it can draw in order to offer ‘cultural activities’ to the public. Second, the community indirectly contributes to the JDP’s project of enlarging its consensus base. The political support the cemaat grants to the party makes the latter confident to entrust the community with educational projects aimed at specific categories of citizens (or potential citizens in the case of the refugees) and carried out under partial state control. In other words, the party allowed the community to enter state-controlled fields because it knows that the community, in fact, produces JDP voters. Since so much of the community-state collaboration depends on the mutual support between the cemaat and the JDP, in the next section I will analyse the relationship between the two.

### **5.5 Consultation and mutual support between the cemaat and government representatives**

This alliance between the community and the JDP represents in the current historical juncture the actualisation of the short-term political strategy of the movement, which I call ‘politics of consultation’. This practice, to which the community has historically resorted, consists in the establishment of informal relationships with government representatives and in the organisation of unofficial meetings with them, designed to discuss issues related to religion or to the ongoing political agenda. Some older members of the community describe in their autobiographies or historical novels both the form and the content of the informal meetings they had with government representatives in the '60s, '70s and '80s, especially during the Demirel (Justice Party) and the Özal (Motherland Party) governments (Yaşar, 2000; Yaşar, 2005; Kırkıncı, 2004; Kutlular, 2009).

Here, again, the model for action derives from Bediüzzaman’s behaviour, more precisely from his life after 1950, during what Nur students call the ‘Third Said’ period. After the first democratic election of Turkey, Said Nursi indeed broke his isolation and silence on political matters and started to advise the Democratic Party governments. As Dursun explains, Said Nursi’s stand and activities in this phase may be put into three categories: the first was his offering warnings and guidance to the Democrat Party on his own initiative; the second was his pointing out mistakes that were made from time to time by the party; and the third was his commenting on certain events that occurred in Turkey and worldwide, and his offering



solutions. In other words, he had given up his former stand of total opposition and the consequent refusal to establish relations with governments (Dursun, 1995: 9). This change of attitude is announced in a piece entitled 'To recall an important fact to the Democrats', in which Said Nursi wrote: 'Our way compelled us not to consider the world and politics as far as was possible, but now it has become necessary [to consider the world and politics] and we saw that, in the face of the above two awesome currents [the Republican People's Party and the Democrat Party], the Democrats could assist us' (Official Biography of Said Nursi, Third Part: 1515).

In the current political circumstance meetings are informally organised between Nur students and JDP members and reciprocal sponsorship is fostered between the two. Some of my interviewees reported having met with the JDP government representatives and with Erdoğan himself. They all praised the Prime Minister and other government exponents for being friendly and sincere, and underlined that during these gatherings they did not make political arrangements, but prayed, read the Quran or the Risale and discussed current events (YNIst07; YNIst08; MesIzm02). Besides unofficial consultations, there is a strong mutual support between the party and the movement. Community leaders, on their part, vote for the JPD and advise their followers to do the same. Moreover, they defend the party's policies and decisions during *sohbet* or through official statements and/or articles published on the community's websites. The party, on its part, takes into consideration the community representatives' views, listens to their requests and 'rewards' community members for their support with more or less direct, public manifestations of appreciations.

Over the last years, on several occasions the community has voiced unconditioned support for the JDP and has denigrated its political adversaries, especially during heated public debates. For example, community leaders encouraged the public to vote yes to the referendum on a number of constitutional amendments promoted by the JDP and held on September 12<sup>th</sup> 2010. They also expressed satisfaction and felicitations when the amendments were approved by 58% of votes. The same happened in March 2012, when the Turkish Parliament passed a new legislation on primary and secondary education referred to as 4+4+4 (4 years primary education of first level; 4 years of primary education of second level; 4 years of second education). Community exponents particularly approved the fact that the law, among other things, made it possible for students to choose whether they want to study at a general education middle school or at a religious vocational middle school (*İmam Hatip* schools). The cemaat, moreover, supported the suppression by state police of the revolts that shook Turkey

in June 2013 and heavily criticised the rebels, accusing them of terrorism and vandalism and of bringing back the ghost of the political violence of the '60s and '70s. In December 2013 the community once again backed the JDP during the corruption scandal that featured a wave of arrests of JDP government exponents and businessmen close to the party, accused of bribery, fraud and money laundering. Community members echoed the government in denying the allegations and in blaming members of the Gülen community, who supposedly carried on the investigations, of betraying the nation by acting in the interests of international powers. The cemaat, finally, defended the ban imposed by the government on YouTube and Twitter in March 2014, when Prime Minister Erdoğan vowed to eradicate the sites following the circulation of leaked recordings that implicated him and members of his inner circle in sweeping corruption allegations ([www.risalehaber.com](http://www.risalehaber.com); [www.risaleajans.com](http://www.risaleajans.com); [www.risaletalimhaber.com](http://www.risaletalimhaber.com)).

The JDP, on its part, reciprocated support in a lower tone, with more subtle – but still effective – declarations of appreciation towards the community. On March 31<sup>st</sup> 2014, right after the local elections, Erdoğan gave a triumphant speech from his balcony of the JDP's headquarters in Ankara to thousands of cheering supporters, as early results showed the party winning. During the speech, the Prime Minister thanked God and his supporters for the victory and targeted his enemies in politics, in particular the Republican People's Party, the main opposition party, and the US-based scholar Fetullah Gülen, whom he accused of using networks of followers in the police and judiciary to fabricate graft smears in an effort to topple him<sup>103</sup>. During his long speech, Erdoğan declared: 'Brothers, during the electoral campaign I stressed one thing in particular. Beddiuzzaman Said Nursi says: "Eternal truths are not built on mortal (transitory) personalities (*baki hakikatlar, fani şahsiyatler üzerine bina edilmez*)"<sup>104</sup>. We are only the servants of a cause which comes from infinity and goes towards eternity. We did not come to this nation to be masters, but to be servants. We are simply the carrier of the stones of this great cause. Yesterday we were not here, but this cause was. Tomorrow we will not be here, but this cause will be. God willing, our crescent and star flag will keep fluctuating in the highest constellation as a sign of the world's hope for peace"<sup>105</sup>.

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<sup>103</sup> Erdoğan, who had long drawn support from the movement gathered around Gülen, had purged thousands of police officers and hundreds of judges and prosecutors since anti-graft raids, which started on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2014, targeted businessmen close to the premier as well as the sons of some government ministers. The heated local elections in 2014 turned into one of the struggles of the power war between the Gülen community and the JDP.

<sup>104</sup> Beyanat ve Tenvirler: 311.

<sup>105</sup> For the full text of the speech see the official website of the JDP at <http://www.akparti.org.tr/site/haberler/12.-cumhurbaskani-erdoganin-cumhurbaskanligi-balkon-konusmasinin-tam-metni/66015#1>

This rapid, passing reference to Said Nursi by Erdoğan was a way to indirectly thank the community for standing by his side in the power struggle between the JDP and the Gülen movement and to acknowledge the Nur students as the true heirs of Bediüzzaman in comparison to the followers of Gülen.

On December 1<sup>st</sup> 2012 one of the first Nur students who personally met Said Nursi, and leader of the community, Mustafa Sungur, passed away. The next day Sungur's funeral was celebrated by the President of Diyanet, Mehmet Görmez, in the courtyard of the Fatih Mosque right after the afternoon prayer. As the news of Mustafa Sungur's death spread among community members, the sadness of the loss was offset by a pinch of pride about the fact the President of Diyanet had visited him in his hospital room, just fifteen minutes before his death, and had offered to celebrate the funeral in person. On the day of the funeral, the roads around the Fatih Mosque were closed to traffic as people were trying to reach the building in droves. From the corner of the overcrowded mosque's courtyard where I was standing with a small group of women, I could see nothing except the emotional zeal on the faces of the people who were following the funeral. The voice of Prime Minister Erdoğan giving a brief speech was an appreciated surprise for the people around me who, just like me, could not see the front of the celebration. Erdoğan's words reached us, echoed by comments of approval from the crowd: 'Valuable brothers, a few moments earlier, at the invitation of the President of Diyanet, you have given up your rights (*hakınız helal ettiniz*)<sup>106</sup>. May our rights be given up. We have no worries about that. During their lifetime, they [community elders] really fought a big battle for the sake of leaving in this celestial sphere a beautiful voice. They suffered torment and hardship. Now they are bringing these torments and hardships with them. We know this very well. We have always witnessed this. We just renewed our testimony. The concern and respect that has been shown clearly demonstrates who is who. May our Lord be loving and helpful'. After the funeral, the body of Mustafa Sungur was brought to the Eyüp Sultan cemetery to be buried. Free buses were arranged by the Municipality of Fatih to carry attendants of the funeral from the mosque to the cemetery. As participation to the funeral was higher than expected, people who could not manage to get on a bus, walked all the way to Eyüp to offer a final salute to Sungur Abi. This public funeral, attended by eminent political figures and logistically coordinated by the municipality, left

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<sup>106</sup> During funerals, in Islam, the imam invites everyone in the crowd of mourners to shout out with one voice 'Yes, we give up our rights'. This has the function of demonstrating publicly that nobody holds any resentment against the deceased. In this way Allah can accept him/her into heaven. This ritual comes from the idea that Allah only forgives sins against another person if that person is prepared to give up their rights to see Allah giving punishment.

community members with the empowering feeling that, after decades of persecution and denial, their cause was, finally, being officially recognised and appreciated by the state.

### **5.6 Different voices within the community**

It is important to underline that not all the subgroups within the community support and collaborate with the JDP. The Yeni Asya group clearly criticises the policies and the mentality of the JDP in its daily newspaper *Yeni Asya*, and overtly disapproves of the close relationships that the other Nur groups established with the party. The Yeni Asya group, being in disagreement with the other groups' view that 'the JDP carries the spirit of the Democratic Party – Justice Party political line' (*AKP, DP-AP mânâsını taşıyor*), openly sustains the Democratic Party (*Demokrat Parti*), a conservative, right wing, minority party founded in 2001 (see Appendix M). The party casts itself as the heir of the Democratic Party – the Justice Party – Right Path Party political line and on this ground was able to gain support from the Yeni Asya group. This support is granted despite the fact that the party does not reach the 10% threshold of votes necessary, according to the Turkish Constitution, to be represented in Parliament. The Zehra and Med-Zehra groups, instead, have no political affiliations and do not disclose political opinions.

The Yeni Asya group considers the JDP as the result of the secret plans of two political currents that aspire at undermining the true meaning of Islam: Kemalism, at domestic level, and global capitalism, at international level. The group sees the JDP as the final form of the process that started with the military coup of 1980 and aimed at exploiting Islam to reproduce state mentality and to make a new form of Kemalism accepted among the masses (Güleçyüz, 2011: 61-64; 72-73). Members of the group criticise the statements often made by the party's representatives in favour of Kemalism and the reverence shown by them to the figure of Atatürk. While they recognised that in the Turkish institutional context these forms of respect toward the founding principles and father of the Republic are an ineluctable duty of governing authorities, they find it unacceptable that a party that makes straightforward and continuous references to Islam 'made peace with Kemalism' (*Kemalizmle barıştı*) (YAIst01; YAIst02; YAIst10).

Yeni Asya is also very critical of what it considers to be an infiltration among the masses of market values, which occurred, according to the group, because of the support the JDP

received from global capitalism. This trend brought about the transformation of pious Muslims into Islamic aristocrats and the emptying of sacred Islamic values from their true meaning. In this way Ramadan was turned into an occasion to consume expensive meals, the Hajj to Mecca became the opportunity to spend some time in luxury hotels, and the veil became a fashion accessory. Moreover – the group claims – in order to back up the global political current that made its power possible, the JDP complies to the principles of *realpolitik* indicated by global powers in the fields of both domestic and international politics and approves if not takes part in exploitation and injustice (Güleçyüz, 2011: 64-67).

According to the group, the dynamics that brought the JDP to power also had a negative effect on religious communities. Politicisation of the *cemaats* started with the foundation of the National Order Party by Necmettin Erbakan in 1970. Since not all the Turkish religious communities flew into the party, the state intervened with the 1980 military coup and with the foundation of the Özal's Motherland Party. Starting from the Özal period, the *cemaat* received state financial and logistical support, were turned first into economic enterprises and were then politicised. Capitalist values of commerce and wealth accumulation eroded the disinterested, sincere, aims of the service carried out by the communities. Cooperation with political power completed the spiritual erosion of their identity. The final result was a secularisation (*dünyevileştirme*) (in the sense of an increasing concern for worldly affairs) of the *cemaats* and the loss of their otherworldly outlook (Güleçyüz, 2011: 61-67).

Finally, the party is criticised for the following flaws: emptying the spiritual and civilizational content of Islam by using it as a source of political ideology and identity; not being truly democratic and being hinged on the figure of Erdoğan, who takes decision and rules without a necessary system of checks and balances internal to the party; being intolerant towards opposition; having altered the balance of powers in the Turkish political system in favour of the executive power; not having changed the Constitution imposed by the military junta in 1982; and not having passed a law that would ensure once and for all women's right to wear a veil in state institutions (Yeni Asya Gazetesi 2002-2013).

The group also thinks that voting for the JDP conflicts with the Risale's predicament that an Islamist party can lead a country only after that country's society is completely and truly Islamized. As one of the interviewees pointed out: 'The other groups support the understanding of politics of the JDP. We, instead, in this historical moment, do not find the approach of the JDP in line with the teachings of Said Nursi. Bediüzzaman's warning against

putting the Islamic identity before religion is fully and conscientiously established within society. Pushing for Islamic identity before times are ripe, Bediüzzaman says, can provoke serious damage to religion. This will lead to the inevitable consequence of making religion the tool of politics' (YAAnk01).

The Zehra and Med-Zehra groups do not have any political affiliation and do not openly support any political party. Before political or local elections members of the group are simply advised to vote (or not to vote) according to their conscience. It is so because they are not fully represented by any of the existing parties. For them, indeed, the JDP leans too much toward Turkish nationalism, while the Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi), which represents Kurdish interests in the Turkish Parliament, has an overly secular worldview. During the interviews, the majority of the informants from Zehra and Med-Zehra preferred not to share information about their political attitudes, to avoid any association of the groups with a political current. Nevertheless, from the informal conversations I had with the groups' members it emerged that their political behaviour oscillates between voting for the JDP, voting for the PDP, and boycotting the elections. The PDP is criticised for not taking into account the religious needs and the Islamic identity of the population, while the JDP is mostly criticised for working only in the interests of the Turkish people, but also, on the same lines of the Yeni Asya remarks, for being a product of global capitalism and Kemalism. The other groups within the community, Yeni Asya included, are not spared criticism concerning their political behaviour. They are accused of the following misdeeds: having established, over the decades, too close relationships with governing parties (these being the JP, MP or JDP); having betrayed the original, oppositional stance of the Risale; having compromised with the state; and having turned the Nur movement into the elongated arm of political power that operates within the society (ZehIst01; MedIst02; MedIst03; MedMar01; MedUrfa01; MedVan01; MedVan02).

## **5.7 Conclusions**

In contrast to other Islamist movements in Turkey and in the Muslim world, the Nur community in its official discourse does not advocate the direct use of the political system to build an Islamic state in the sense that it does not promote the transformation of the community into a political party that would take the power. This attitude does not originate from the refusal of Republican principles or parliamentary institutions. It rather derives from

Nursi's warning that involvement with politics would corrupt the sincerity of belief and the brotherhood among Muslims and from his theory that the Islamization of society should start from the individual and not from the state. Despite this total theoretical rejection of the utility of politics, the cemaat does, in fact, engage with political parties and institutions and has developed two cognitive tools – the distinction between collective personality and individuality and the distinction between passive and active politics – to justify its political involvement.

The narrative about politics built by community leaders is a case of adaptation of an authoritative discourse – that of Said Nursi – to practice. Thus constructed, the narrative serves the function of rationalising for grassroots members the community's complex approach to political power. The movement's historical and current *de facto* interactions with political parties and state institutions reveal indeed a double-layered strategy. In the long term, the cemaat aims at collaborating and communicating with the state in order to influence it and push it towards the promotion of religious values in the public sphere. In the short term, instead, the community aims at establishing ties with political parties that could help it in obtaining access to state institutions. Building relationship with the parties in power is not aimed at sharing some of the power with them, but serves the purpose of offering to the community more channels and more resources to carry out its project of Islamization of society and state and its politics of presence and influence.

Historically speaking, these long-term and short-term strategies have always been present in the movement's outlook. The long-term aspiration to influence the state to the point that it would be permeated with Islamic principles has remained over the years as an ideal and fixed objective. Instead, the means used to reach the intermediate, short-term goal of obtaining political parties' support have undergone slight modifications. From 1950 until today the community has resorted to three tactics to establish political alliances with right-wing parties: direct participation of community members in elections; sporadic, *ad hoc* involvement in party-sponsored political events like meetings and street demonstrations; and relationship building and consultation with government representatives both at national and local level (see Chapter 2). While over the decades the use of these three strategies has remained constant, the intensity of their use has varied, according to changing political conditions. Compared to the past, the community today resorts less to the candidacy of its members at the election and to the participation in political meetings and street demonstrations, but it is more intensely involved in local and national consultations.

Moreover, after the 1980 military coup it is possible to notice a progressive de-politicisation of the community-owned media, which over the last decades have been focusing more and more on issues concerning faith, family life, children's education and health. In the community's periodicals the high pitched critiques of Kemalist and Communist ideals, the call for the unity of the Islamic Ummah, and the passionate advocacy of an Islamic society, typical of the '60s and '70s publications, gave way to non-confrontational, non-political articles on religious rituals, psychology, family vacations, sports and halal food. From time to time articles appear on the community websites that clarify the community's political stances, but this happens only in politically tense moments, when the public debate is particularly heated. The only exception to this trend is represented by the *Yeni Asya* newspaper, which continues to express in a systematic way a clear political positioning and maintains (slightly softened) confrontational tones.

This transformation is in line with the general post-1980 de-politicisation of Turkish society and with the post-1997 softening of Turkish Islamist actors' stands. The change is also the result of what Berna Turan calls the 'politics of engagement' between Islam and the state. By politics of engagement she means the 'continuum of interplay between Islamic actors and state actors, ranging from contestation and negotiation to accommodation, cooperation and alliance' (Turan, 2007: 13). The politics of engagement, she argues, brought about the demise of confrontation; that is, the decline of radical forces of both Islamism and laicism. As a consequence, it generated a rising agreement, cooperation and a growing sense of belonging between the secular state and Islamic actors, thus creating a consensus on a limited number of fundamental issues (Turan, 2007).

However, the softened tones and the decrease of direct political participation are only one side of the community's current approach to politics. On the other side, Nur students are involved at a deeper level in consultation with party representatives and cooperation with the state institutions at local and national level. In the past, the support for the Democratic Party, Justice Party and the Motherland Party was as open as the current support for the JDP, but the relationships between these parties and the cemaat were less intense. If we look back at the history of the community within the general context of Turkish history and examine the current situation, we may notice that the evolution of the community's relations with political power is emblematic of a more general, national trend: the progressive increase, from the DP to the JDP, in the use by the governing party of the strategy of building ties with religious communities (see Chapter 2). The DP established discontinuous, loose ties with local



religious notables; the JP formed systematic alliance with religious representatives at both local and national level; the MP adopted the tactic of including religious communities' members and religious notables in the bureaucracy; the JDP resorts to intense cooperation with religious communities, no longer considered just as a pool of votes, but also as powerful allies in the effort of Islamizing society and enlarging the party's consensus base. The Nur community, indeed, is not the only political ally of the JDP within society, although it is one of the strongest.

I argue that this situation represents a post-engagement period, when the confrontation is no longer between Islam and the secular state, but between Islam and an increasingly Islam-oriented state. If the politics of engagement represented the end of the opposition between Islam and the state, the current political configuration denotes the end of the engagement – intended as a bargaining process on the role of Islam in the public sphere – and the beginning of cooperation for the Islamization of the public sphere. In this new arrangement, the distinction between the state and the Islamic civic society, which had already become progressively more blurred over the past decades, is completely outdone<sup>107</sup>.

To be clear, the borders between the community and the party are net, in the sense that the two institutions work autonomously and their members (in the majority of the cases) do not overlap. The Nur community under the JDP rule still amounts to an independent social formation able to function and to mobilise social capital without political support. However, the socio-political aims and the outward rhetoric of the cemaat and the party converge to the point that the community, with the noticeable exception of the Yeni Asya, Zehra and Med-Zehra groups, functions, in fact, as an unofficial agent of dissemination of state ideology, even if it maintains its peculiar political-theological views.

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<sup>107</sup> The new political configuration does not mean that the JDP has changed the nature of the state. On the contrary, what we are witnessing is the quintessential functioning of the Kemalist state. In other words, the JDP has changed the colouring of the state, while leaving its deeper structure intact. I argue that the best way to conceptualise this situation is to resort to Parla and Davison's definition of Kemalism as a form of corporatism. Resorting to the wider analytical framework of organic statism, Murat Akan underlines how both Kemalists and Islamists have promoted the recourse to religion as 'the cement of society' and argues that the two currents have no significant difference in their respective conceptual and institutional mobilisation of religion (Akan, 2012). While agreeing with Akan, I would add to his argument that the similarity between the two currents lies also in the instrumental use they made or make of civil society institutions to promote their respective understanding of state-society-religion configurations. The strong collaboration unfolding during the JDP era between state and civil society institutions for the propagation of official ideology – in this case a rational, modern, nationalistic, non-revolutionary and pro-state form of Islam – is indeed a reproduction of the organic-static politics of the Kemalist military-civilian establishment.

Finally, a few words need to be spent on the existence of different voices among Nur students and on the opposition between the Nur and the Fetullah Gülen communities. Divergent political opinions (where ‘political’ means anything that is related to daily politics and not to the general theory of state and governance) have historically played an important role in the division of the community in several subgroups. As explained in Chapter 2, the split between Meşveret and Yeni Asya in 1980 was due to the different stances assumed by the two groups towards the military coup. Similarly, the further secession of Yeni Nesil from Yeni Asya was motivated by a dispute about the tone and the content that articles dealing with daily politics in the groups’ magazines should have displayed. Today, the Scribes, Meşveret and Yeni Nesil, grouped on one side, are in disagreement with the Yeni Asya, Zehra and Med-Zehra, grouped on the other side, with regard to the attitude Nur students should take towards the JDP, and they accuse each other of giving a mistaken interpretation of the Risale by supporting the JDP, the AP, or neither of the two. This internal divergence is coupled by the opposition to the Gülen movement, criticised in the past for infiltrating the state and accused in the present of aiming at weakening Turkey by attempting to overthrow the JDP government. All of these ‘intra-Nur students’ antagonisms are not related to theological concerns but are clearly political in nature and underline precisely the political dimension of the tactical and strategic decision to support or not to support the JDP.

## Chapter 6

### **New research perspectives: a comparison with the Italian Catholic ‘Movimento dei Focolarini’**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I outline a potential area of research that gives a cross-religious dimension to the study of the formation of religious socio-political imaginaries and of new spiritually grounded approaches to citizenship. The new research perspective I have in mind is based on the belief that the innovations in terms of community structure and socio-political views operated by Said Nursi are expressions of a larger phenomenon of religious renovation that goes beyond the borders of Islam. This trend is strictly connected to modernity, in that it involves the programmatic re-interpretation of the founding principles of religion in a way that would fit the needs of men in modern times while at the same time maintaining a rigorous orthodoxy.

It is indeed the encounter with modernity that gives rise to new forms of religiosity aimed at contrasting two aspects of contemporary societies: the loss or weakening of religious values and foundational certainties and the increasing individualism and atomisation of social life. The solution proposed to these two challenges posed by modernity is twofold: on the one hand it involves the intense study of and continued reflection on the Sacred Scriptures directed at strengthening the faith and at creating renewed awareness of the relationship between God and the believer; on the other hand, it requires the foundation of religious communities and the transformation of faith observed at individual level into everyday activism within society. Meditation on religious texts and social engagement are practiced collectively within these (relatively) new movements, whose initiating principle is the idea that the authentic selfhood is to be found in the context of the community. It is indeed through the community that the believer can elevate himself and ultimately become at one with God and it is the community that provides the correct model for the organisation of the entire society. Moreover, these new religious movements cultivate a ‘philosophy of life’ that, starting from a specific idea of personhood, extends to every single aspect of the social realm, including family relations, education, politics and the economy.

It can be fruitful to develop these themes through the lens of a comparison between the Nur Movement, and the ‘Movement of the *Focolarini*’ (literary, those who hold the fireplace),

known also as the '*Focolare*' (the fireplace), an Italian Catholic community founded in the mid 1940s by a young, religiously inspired woman called Chiara Lubich. The community was officially recognised by the Vatican in 1962, and today is widespread across the world and counts more than two million adherents. In the chapter I will delineate the birth and the history of the movement, its organisation, the founding principles of its spirituality, and its political mission. This brief description of the movement will be followed by some remarks about the similarities between the Focolarini and the Nur community.

Before proceeding, however, it seems appropriate to elaborate more on the rationale behind the choice of the Focolare movement. The logic of comparison is based on similarity in terms of cognitive processes, modes of connectivity and patterns of civic engagement, rather than in terms of the specific content of the two communities' socio-political imaginary. The Focolare movement accords great relevance to practices based on collective religious reasoning and promotes among its members constant reflection on the Word of God. This continuous mediation on the Scriptures reconnects everyday practices and ethical behaviour to wider cosmologies, thus giving meaning not only to acts of worship, but also to life in general. However, meditative techniques do not aim simply at giving an ontological foundation to the formation of the self: once the re-conceptualization of personhood and of the relationships between the self, God and the other is achieved, religious reasoning is extended to the political field, here intended not as everyday politics, but as a general theory of state, governance and society. This means that, like in the case of the Nur community, in the Focolare movement education to citizenship is considered as a necessary step of the believer's religious training, to be addressed only once a preceding phase of moral education based on religious reasoning is completed (see Chapter 1). Moreover, like in the case of the Nur community, the reflection on theological concepts and on their application to the realm of politics brings about a carefully constructed religious socio-political imaginary (see Chapter 4).

Another aspect of the Focolare movement that is significant in view of a comparison with the Nur community is its conceptualization of unity among adherents. The new spirituality that the movement promotes puts a great emphasis on the sense of collectivity and reciprocity that can be built if the connection between the self and the other is mediated by God and informed by the relationships established between God and the self. Such a collectivity is simultaneously the result of moral dispositions instilled in the adherents to the movement and a means to reach a higher level of ethical maturity, because it is through the relationship with

the other that the believer can reach true knowledge of God and can elevate himself morally and spiritually. Here we have a way of conceptualizing the collectivity that is reminiscent of the Nur community (see Chapter 3). The stress on brotherhood, unity and reciprocity in both the Nur and the Focolare movements is clearly part of a wide phenomenon of reconstruction of community after the individualization of religion. But it is not just that; it is also a call for a renewal of the social bond at society and state level. In both movements, indeed, the relationships established inside the community are deemed to be paradigmatic of the relationships that should be established in society at large, in a view that makes of the community a virtuous prototype of society. Then, this religiously inspired understanding of brotherhood and unity assumes a political significance insofar as it comes to represent the relational principle that sustains the social contract. Consequently, it is an integral part of the two movements' call for a reconstruction of a transcendental order in politics and society.

## **6.2 The birth of a new community**

The Focolare began during World War II with a small group of young women, whose ages ranged from fifteen to twenty-five, who were living in the city of Trent, Italy. The group was led by Chiara Lubich, who was only twenty-three years old at the time. In 1939, during a conference of Catholic female students in Loreto, a city in central Italy, Chiara Lubich had the first, vague vision of what, years later, would become the Focolare. Enshrined in the Church of Loreto is the house where the Holy Family used to live in Nazareth, brought to Italy during the Crusades. Contemplating that little house, Lubich had the intuition that it was necessary to re-create in the modern era that family environment, that cohabitation of virgins. This new form of living together would have made possible, thanks to mutual and enduring love, the spiritual presence of Jesus among the cohabitants, just like it was for Mary and Joseph, who had Jesus physically among them. As Lubich narrates in her memoirs, at that time, even if she did not know exactly what her vocation in life would be, she was certain that none of the options traditionally offered by the Catholic Church to women – getting married, joining a female religious order, or being personally dedicated to the church as an individual working within a parish – would have fulfilled her spiritual needs (Fondi and Zanzucchi, 2003: 10-11). With the foundation of the Focolare she would have discovered a 'fourth way'.

Years later, Lubich's home was destroyed by the Allied bombing in 1944 and her family decided to leave the city of Trent and seek refuge in the countryside. Lubich instead choose to

remain in Trent with the companions she had met during her time as an activist of Azione Cattolica<sup>108</sup> and Terzo Ordine Francescano<sup>109</sup>. Lubich and her friends would meet in the bomb shelters, where they would take with them only the Bible. By candlelight they would read the Holy text to find guidance in that difficult situation. At that time, as Mitchell puts it, ‘a foundational discovery of these young women was a collective and yet very personal experience, in the midst of the death and the destruction of the war, that God is Love (I John, 4:8)’ (Mitchell, 3003: 22). The reading of the First Letter of John, as well as other parts of the Bible, not only strengthened their belief in God, but also their faith in the fact that God loved each one of them immensely. It was this first intuition of ‘God as Love’ that informed the following experience of the Focolare.

A second step in their meditations was that of finding a way to react to the God’s love. Looking for an answer, they searched again in the Scripture and found the verse ‘It is not those who say to me “Lord, Lord” who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who also does the will of the Father in heaven’ (Matt. 7:21), from which they understood that God does not seek only a response of individual piety, but a response that includes doing God’s will (Mitchell, 3003: 22). This intuition indicates the shift of focus from religious contemplation to religiously-inspired action, an ideational resource that was significant for the development of the movement.

At that time the young women also started a practice what later on became generalised in the Focolare: the ‘Parola di Vita’ (Life’s Word). Every week they would read and then try to ‘live’ a Life’s Word, that is, a line from the Bible. To live a verse of the Scriptures meant to reflect intensely on it and put it into practice, in a way that, day after day, the comprehension and the implementation of the Word of God would increase and improve. The model for this practice was represented by the Virgin Mary, who used to pick up on words and events originated from God and meditate about them in her heart: in this way, slowly, she used to absorb Divine thought and conform to His will (Fondi and Zanzucchi, 2003: 54). This way of reading the Scripture was innovative because these first Focolarini, in order to encourage each other and grow up spiritually, used to have weekly meetings in which each participant would tell the group the concrete way in which she had tried to put into practice the Life’s Word

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<sup>108</sup> The Azione Cattolica Italiana (Italian Catholic Action), founded in 1867, is the oldest Italian Catholic association of laymen and laywoman.

<sup>109</sup> The Terzo Ordine Francescano (Franciscan Third Order), which in 1978 took the name of Ordine Francescano Secolare (Franciscan Lay Order), is an association of lay Christians who aim at living the Gospel in the manner of Saint Francis from Assisi.

during that week and the consequences this implementation had had in her life. The habit of reflecting on the 'lived Gospel', initially restricted to the small group of Lubich's friends, was soon extended to different layers of the population of Trento. Public meetings centred around the Life's Word and led by Lubich started to be held in the city and quickly became very popular.

In 1944, Lubich and some of her friends, moved into a small, two-room apartment in Trento, thus giving birth to the first Focolare. The young women used to live according to the communion of goods, putting their incomes and their personal belongings at the service of each other and of the poor and needy people of the city. This new, radically evangelical way of living was inspired by several passages from the Bible. One of them was the story of the last judgment narrated in the Gospel of Matthew. There it says that those who will enter the kingdom of God will be the persons who feed the hungry, give drinks to the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and prisoners (Matt. 25: 31-46). The reading of this segment, together with the verse 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Matt. 22:39), convinced them that what God wanted from them was that they helped and loved in any moment everyone who was next to them and in need. They also took inspiration from the verses: 'Give and it will be given to you' (Luke: 6:38) and 'Ask and it will be given to you' (Matt. 7:7). They were giving to the poor whatever they did not need for sustenance and were asking the people of Trent to donate goods that were in surplus so that they could redistribute them among those in need, thus creating a spontaneous welfare network that would function at grassroots level, without the intervention of state or religious institutions.

Another crucial element that informed the life in the Focolare was the idea of 'Jesus in the midst' (Gesù in mezzo). The insight about the possibility of reaching the communal presence of Jesus came from the verse, found again in Matthew's Gospel, 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be in the midst of them' (Matt. 18:20). Lubich explained this concept to her companions in the following way: 'To have Him [Jesus] with us we need to be ready to give life for each other. Jesus is spiritually and fully present among us if we are united in this way. He said "May they be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John, 17:21)' (Lubich, 1978: 13). As Mitchell points out, this communal 'fire' became the centre of Lubich's new movement. Instead of individually seeking the spiritual presence of God at the centre of their souls, these young women considered themselves as 'one soul', committed to achieve a communal presence of God at the centre of their community (Mitchell, 2003: 23).

Thanks to the practice of the Life's Word and to the charitable activities of the Focolare, Lubich's community became widely known in the city and, in 1945, by the end of the war, a group of 500 followers, attracted by its innovative and uncompromised way of living religion, had formed around it. Lubich and her companions lived together in community as single laywomen working in the world, and yet they took the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. These women, dedicated to living according to the Gospel in a radical way, were talking about love and unity, practicing the communion of goods and basing their ideas directly on the Scripture, bypassing the traditional intermediary of the Catholic Church. They had among their followers families, laymen (who would take the same vows as women and live in separate houses), even priests and religious men and women belonging to different orders. All of this represented a challenge to the traditional rules and hierarchies of the Catholic Church.

In the 1940s, while still confined to the city of Trento, the movement, because of its originality, had already raised many doubts in the Catholic world. In the 1950s, when the movement extended to the rest of Italy, Italian Catholic bishops started to observe and study it to determine if, despite its untraditional associational form and doctrine, it was compatible with the structure and the dogma of the Catholic Church. The examination started in 1949 and ended in 1962, when the movement obtained its first official approval from the Vatican, signed by Pope John XXIII. Under the pontificate of Paul VI the movement received further approval and the first official hearings were granted to its representatives. In 1990 the 'Pontifical Council for laymen and laywomen' (Consiglio Pontificio per i laici) approved the general statute of the movement, which is still in force today; it was the last and more complete version of a series of documents ratified by the Vatican in different historical moments. For Lubich it was of utmost importance that her community situated itself unequivocally within the Catholic Church and was acknowledged as legitimate by the Vatican. Such recognition was so relevant for her that on several occasions she confessed to her intimate companions that, should the Pope have ordered so, the entire organisational structure of the Focolare would have been dismissed.

In the 1950s the movement expanded outside the border of Italy into other European countries and between 1958 and 1967 it reached all the five continents. By the end of the 1950s the structure of the community had become more complex and diversified, incorporating children, young adults, married couples, volunteers and allowing all the members to have different 'vocations'. At the beginning of the '60s the spirit of the Focolare also started to



penetrate also into Christian, non-Catholic communities, thus paving the way for the future efforts of the movement in the field of an ecumenical understanding of Christianity first, and inter-faith dialogue later. Finally, in the 1990s the activities of the movement expanded to the following fields: the doctrinal elaboration of Lubich's spirituality with the foundation of the Abba School (Scuola Abbà) of theology in 1990; the formulation of economic practices inspired by the teaching of the Bible with the launch of the project Economy of Communion (Economia di Comunione) in Brazil in 1991; and the participation to national and international political debates with the birth of the Political Movement for Unity (Movimento Politico per l'Unità) founded in Naples, Italy, in 1996.

### **6.3 Organisation of the movement**

Given that the Focolare was officially recognised by the Vatican, and since there are no obstacles in the Italian civil law to the foundation of religious associations, the movement, contrary to the Nur community, adopted throughout the years a clearly defined hierarchical structure. The organisation of the movement and the functions of all of its branches are outlined in its official Statute, where it is stated that the administrative style of the Focolare must be inspired by the principle of 'mutual and continuous charity that makes unity possible and brings the presence of Jesus into the collectivity' (<http://www.focolare.org/movimento-dei-focolari/organizzazione/>).

At the top of the hierarchy of the movement, which is also called 'Work of Mary' (*Opera di Maria*), there is the 'Centre of the Work' (*Centro dell'Opera*), an organ composed of the President, the Co-president and the Counsellors. These are elected every six years by the General Assembly (*Assemblea Generale*). Among the duties of the General Assembly there is also to deliberate on and sanction amendments to the General Statute or to local branches' regulations. The Centre of the Work has the responsibility of ensuring and increasing the Unity within the movement, by coordinating the activities of its branches. According to the Statute, the President has to be a laywoman, in order to preserve the devotion of the movement to the Virgin Mary and its lay nature, and in order to 'stay faithful to the plan of God who entrusted the foundation and development of the movement to a woman' (<http://www.focolare.org/movimento-dei-focolari/organizzazione/>). The current president is Maria Voce, elected by the General Assembly in 2008 and reconfirmed in 2014. The Co-president has to be chosen among the priests belonging to the movement and his role is to

ensure that life inside the Work and its actions are in conformity with faith, morality and the Catholic Church's discipline. Moreover, he supervises the activities of priests, deacons, and seminarians that operated within the movement. The current Co-president is Jesús Morán Cepedano, elected in 2014.

Below the Centre of the Work there is the General Council (*Consiglio Generale*) composed of the members of the Centre of the Work and the general supervisors of the secretariats for specific aims. It has advisory and deliberative functions and its main objective is maintaining and increasing the unity among the different parts of the movement. The Focolare has branches in 182 countries, organised in 'zones' (*zone*), which can include a region, an entire nation, or multiple nations together. For each zone the President appoints as her delegates one male member and one female member of the Focolare. The latter are responsible for the life and action of the movement in that territory and are supported by a zone council (*consiglio di zona*). Every zone is made up of different male and female focolari who, together with local councils, promote the spirituality of the movement in the territory. Finally, there is a web of local communities composed of people of different ages and vocations that live and operate in the society according to the values and teachings of the Bible (<http://www.focolare.org/movimento-dei-focolari/organizzazione/>).

There are within the movement different kinds of choices and commitments, called 'vocations' (*vocazioni*): Focolarini, volunteers, religious men and women, priests, bishops and 'gen' (youths). The Focolarini are single men and women who live in separate communities called *Focolari* (hearths), which lay at the core of the movement. Just like Lubich and her first companions, they leave their family, friends and homes and put their goods in common possession, in order to give themselves to God and contribute to the realisation of Jesus' prayer: 'That all be one' (John, 17:21). Some male Focolarini are ordained to the priesthood. Some others, men and women, may be married. When both spouses are Focolarini they form a 'family hearth' (*famiglia focolare*), that is, a family that is ready to move to other parts of the world in order to help to spread the movement's spirituality of unity (<http://www.focolare.org/usa/about-us/choices-and-commitments/focolarini/>).

The volunteers, also known as 'volunteers of God' (*volontari di Dio*), are men and women of all social categories and professions who chose to follow God radically with their free will (hence the name 'volunteer'). The volunteers form the New Humanity Movement (*Movimento per la Nuova Umanità*), which was founded in the late '60s and represents the Focolare

expression in civic life. The volunteers do not live together in houses as communities of laymen and laywomen, but they practice the communion of goods and, without any particular consecration, work to bring the spirit of unity elaborated by Lubich into their social environments (<http://www.focolare.org/usa/about-us/choices-and-commitments/volunteers/>).

Other members of the movement are men and women belonging to Religious Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies for Apostolate. The branch of the Religious Institutes within the movement was founded in 1967, when 25 consecrated religious men from across Europe spent 15 days together in Trento in order to deepen their understanding of the charism of unity. According to the Statute of the Work of Mary, the link between them and the movement, is 'essentially a commitment which is spiritual in nature', and their involvement must be with the permission of their superior (<http://www.focolare.org/usa/about-us/choices-and-commitments/men-and-women-religious>). Among the adherents of the movement there are also priests and bishops. Their involvement with the Focolare does not detract from the life of their diocese, but it unfolds in addition to it. The first Focolare of priests and deacons was founded in Rome, in 1964. Today they are more than 200 hearths in the world, which are made up of diocesans, priests and permanent deacons (<http://www.focolare.org/usa/about-us/choices-and-commitments/priests>). Bishops belonging to the movement are not only catholic, but also from other Christian Churches. They meet annually in places with ecumenical significance. Their relationship to the movement is of a purely spiritual nature and it illuminates many fields of action of their ministry: from pastoral activity and relations with their collaborators, to dialogue within and outside the church and evangelisation (<http://www.focolare.org/usa/about-us/choices-and-commitments/bishops/>).

In 1967, the Gen movement was founded, which encompasses the new generations of the Focolare. The Gens gather together according to different ages: the Gen 2 are young adults aged 18 and over; the Gen 3 are boys and girls whose ages range from 9 to 17; the Gen 4 are children aged 4 to 8; and the Gen 5 are children from 1 to 4. All the Gen around the world meet in small groups and the activities they organise (or that are organised for them in the case of the younger children) are tailored to the needs and abilities of their age group (<http://www.focolare.org/usa/about-us/choices-and-commitments/gen/>).

The movement also runs 'little towns' (*cittadelle*) around the world, inhabited by Focolarini, where the life of the entire community is inspired to the principles of the spirituality of unity. These places, also called 'permanent mariapolis' (*mariapoli permanenti*), are made up by

houses, work places, shops, schools, churches, art centres, and relaxation areas, just like ordinary towns. The first of these little towns was founded in Loppiano, Italy, in 1964, and many others followed all over the world. The purposes of the little towns are ‘testimony and education’ (*testimonianza e formazione*). Testimony means concrete evidence that cohabitation of different people based on unity, love and a spiritual and material communion of goods is possible. Education, instead, refers to the training in the spirituality of the movement that Focolarini, volunteers, religious men and women, priests and Gens get in the little towns. Once their education is completed these community members travel around the world or go back to their home countries to spread the principles of the charisma of unity.

#### **6.4 The Spirituality of the Unity**

The spirituality developed by Chiara Lubich puts a particular emphasis on the communitarian dimension of Christian life. The originality of her approach in comparison to the traditional Catholic ways of ‘reaching God’ is well expressed by Father Juesús Castellano: ‘In the history of Christian spirituality it was said: “Christ is in me, he lives in me,” and this is the perspective of individual spirituality [...] When it also was said: “Christ is present in my brothers,” this develops the perspective of works of charity, but it falls short of saying that if Christ is in me and Christ is in you, then the Christ in me loves the Christ in you and vice versa...which would involve a mutual giving and receiving. [...] This spirituality is a hallmark of our century, where there has been a rediscovery of the Church. The Movement gives us “something extra” with its collective spirituality and that is the vision and creation of a communion, an ecclesial life of the “Mystical Body”, in which there is a mutual giving of persons and the dimension of becoming one’<sup>110</sup> (quoted in Lubich, 2002: 14).

On the same lines Lubich underlines the difference between the kind of Christian spirituality focused primarily on the advance of the individual toward God, which she calls ‘individual spirituality’ (*spiritualità individuale*) and the spirituality of her movement, based on the communion with others, which she calls ‘collective spirituality’ (*spiritualità collettiva*). According to Lubich, individual spirituality was a consequence of those early days in Christianity when believers, with the end of persecution, lost the fervour that had characterised the first Christian communities and concentrated on preserving their own

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<sup>110</sup> Jesús Castellano, O. C. D., Letter to Chiara Lubich about the collective spirituality (the spirituality of unity) in the Work of Mary, 21 June 1992.

personal faith, by withdrawing from the world and avoiding contact with other human beings. The vehicles of this form of spirituality were solitude, silence, physical separation from others, intense and private prayers, and the practice of penances such as fasts and vigils. Collective spirituality, on the contrary, seeks a communitarian life built around the love for the neighbour. In this view it is through the unity with the brother that the believer becomes aware of his unity with God; it is by loving the brother in the way that the Gospel teaches, that the believer becomes more Christ and, hence, more truly human (Lubich, 2007: 26-32).

According to Lubich, if individual spirituality was the reflection of Medieval mentality, collective spirituality is the product of modern times; it is the answer to the needs of men in contemporary society. As she claims: 'this is the great attraction of the modern world: to enter into the highest contemplation while remaining immersed in the crowd [...] I would go even further: to lose oneself in the crowd in order to imbue everything with divine life [...] to participate in God's plans for the human race, to mark the crowd with tints of light as you share each neighbour's shame and hunger, hardship and the brief joys' (quoted in Fondi and Zanzucchi, 2003: 39).

The collective spirituality of modern times, called also spirituality of unity, hinges on two principles: 'unity' and 'Jesus forsaken', that is, Jesus abandoned on the cross. Lubich considers these two elements as the groundwork of the inspiration she received from God. In this regard she writes: 'The book of love that God is writing in my soul has two aspects: a luminous page of mysterious love: Unity, and a luminous page of mysterious suffering: Jesus forsaken. They are two faces of the same coin' (Lubich, 2007: 25). In the following paragraphs I will try to develop the meaning of these two foundational concepts.

In her memoirs, Lubich recalls the moment when the idea of unity, as the road that God wanted her to follow, appeared clearly to her mind: one day, during the war, while they were seeking shelter from the bombs, the first Focolarine randomly opened the Gospel to the plea made by Jesus before dying: 'That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you' (John, 17: 21). A few days later, reflecting on this verse, Lubich told to her companions: 'I understood how we have to love each other according to the Gospel: to the point of wearing away into one' (quoted in Fondi and Zanzucchi, 2003: 55). From that moment on, unity became the specific vocation of the Focolare.

The desire of 'becoming one with the other' originates from the view of God as the one Father of many children and the consequent recognition that all human beings are sons and

daughters of the same Father-God. But Lubich takes this invitation to cultivate brotherhood a step further. Taking inspiration from the letters in which Saint Paul spurs Christians to build a united Church through reciprocal love and through the imitation of Jesus' attitude on the cross (Philippians, 2: 1-11), she develops an idea of unity based on the reproduction in daily life of the kenotic love displayed by Christ during his Passion. The kenosis Lubich calls for consists in the absolute emptying of the self in order to become fully receptive of God's will and hence completely subservient to others. It is only through this total giving of the self to others that unity among brothers can be built.

Lubich's own words, where a particular emphasis is put on humility intended as the emptying of the soul, express well the kenotic relationship the believer should establish with God and with the other: 'A virtue that unites the soul to God...is humility, the emptying of the self. The smallest shred of the human that does not allow itself to be assumed by the divine breaks unity, and with grave consequences. The unity of the soul with God, who lives within us, presupposes a total emptying of the self, the most heroic humility...Humility also leads souls to unity with others: aspire constantly to the "first place", by putting the self as much as possible at the service of the neighbor. Every soul that wants to achieve unity must claim only one right: to serve everyone, because in everyone the soul serves God...Like Saint Paul [did], though free, [we have to] make ourselves servants (1 Cor., 9.19). The soul that desires to bring about unity must keep itself in such an abyss of humility that it reaches the point of losing its very soul, for the benefit and in the service of God in its neighbor. It re-enters itself only to find God and to pray for its brothers and sisters and for itself. It must live constantly "emptied", because it is totally "in love" with God's will... and in love with the will of its neighbor, who it wants to serve for God. A servant does only what his or her Master's commands' (Lubich, 2007: 18).

Through the emptying of the self the spirituality of unity brings about a new form of sanctity, which is not individual anymore, but collective. Collective sanctity (*santità collettiva*) goes beyond perfection sought individually; it is achieved by groups of committed Christians who, in unity, go toward God. The Focolare aspires at reaching this collective sanctity. Community members 'grow between two fires', in the sense that their ascetic life brings about an intimate union both with the God that is 'within self' and with the God that, being 'outside the self', is present in the collectivity. This living between two fires – Jesus within us and Jesus among us or Jesus in the midst – is a reproduction of the life of the Virgin Mary, who in the house of Nazareth also conducted life between two sources of Divine flames: the Holy Spirit, the

spiritual director of her soul, and Jesus, the Word of God. Imitating Mary's way of living means to lead a life that is simultaneously individual and collective, where the plurality of people who live a life of holiness together increases the holiness of each person, and the holiness of each enriches that of the others. Finally, the lifestyle of the Focolarini requires that they 'leave God for God' that is, they detach from everything, even their own experience of God to make themselves one with their brothers and sisters and, together with them, reach God. It is precisely this detachment that is the condition for the unity in the Focolare and the collective sanctity of its members (Lubich, 2007 and Lubich, 2002).

According to Lubich, the Scriptures offer a supreme model to reach unity and collective sanctity: Jesus crucified and forsaken. The latter is Jesus on the cross, who is abandoned by the Father and cries: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mk, 15:34; Mt, 27:46). This cry represents the 'passion within the passion', the most difficult moment in the Calvary of the Son of God. Jesus on the cross had already lost his disciples and his mother and he was about to lose his life. All that was left to Him was His Father. But at the moment of the cry, he experienced the most dramatic separation, the one from the Father with whom he was and remained one. As Baggio underlines, this separation is so profound that Jesus does not use the word 'Father' to invoke God; looking inside Himself, he does not find traces of the paternal presence of God, he does not recognise Himself as Son. Jesus, so, uses the word that any other man could have used: 'God'. In that moment of abandonment he truly 'reaches the man' that is, the condition, clear in His conscience, of being not 'the Son', but any common man (Baggio, 2012: 65-66).

However, Baggio continues, the cry of Jesus, in spite of appearances, is an act of extreme loyalty toward God. Not knowing who He is anymore, Jesus asks the very same God who has forsaken Him for an explanation. Not receiving an answer, and with the same devotion, Jesus abandoned re-abandons Himself to the Father, by crying out: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Lk, 23: 46) (Baggio, 2012: 65-66). Jesus forsaken is Jesus in the height of suffering, which is also the height of love, because for love he seems to forget that he is God. By being simply human, he 'makes himself one' with all the people who have lived, live, or will live on earth. Afterwards, by commending himself to God, he re-unites all the people on earth with God.

Thus, it is thanks to this separation from the Father and subsequent re-unification with the Father that Jesus gives all humankind a new and fuller unity; he re-unites all with one another

and with God and enables all to participate in his unity. It is this attitude of Jesus, which is for the Focolare the secret of sanctity and the guarantee of unity within the movement. As Lubich writes, ‘because he [Jesus forsaken] had been uprooted from both earth and heaven, he brought into unity those who were “cut off”, those who were uprooted from God. He is truly the way required to reach unity. Through Jesus, in fact, we gain by losing, we live by dying: the grain of wheat has to die in order to produce the ear of grain; we need to be pruned in order to yield good fruits. This is Jesus’ law, his paradox. The Holy Spirit was making us understand that in order to bring about Jesus’ prayer “may they all be one in the world” it is necessary to consume in ourselves any form of abandonment’ (Lubich, 2007: 25-26).

For the Focolare movement Jesus forsaken is a model also for the reason that he seems to be the God of modern times. It is so because, according to the Scriptures, in his forsakenness Jesus made himself ‘sin’ (2 Cor, 5:21) and ‘cursed’ (Gal, 3:13) with the aim of becoming one with those who are far from God. Jesus forsaken is then God’s response to the terrible suffering and trials that contemporary men and women have to face because of the atheism permeating many aspects of modern society, because of the extreme poverty of millions of displaced people and because of the search for spirituality and meaning of the disillusioned and confused new generations. Moreover, Jesus forsaken is the God of modern times because he is the antidote to the divisions and clashes existing among different Christian Churches and among different religions (Lubich, 2007).

Jesus forsaken is also the conceptual element that gives rise to Lubich’s Christian anthropology, in the sense that He is what defines the essence of human beings. According to Baggio the reason why Jesus forsaken re-abandons Himself to the Father is that Jesus, in his nature, is Son. While the abandoned Jesus is reduced to nothing, but, as long as he is a man and alive, he is the Son of God. Philosophically speaking, it is the father-son relationship that defines his form and his substance. Since the Father of Jesus is God, Jesus re-abandons himself to God, and, from that moment on, every man on earth can do the same; thanks to that moment every man on earth assumes the Form of Son. In this lies his very essence as a man. Moreover, in the Christian model the resurrection of Jesus, which follows his re-abandonment, includes every man: in fact Jesus, having reached at the moment of forsakenness every man in his distance from God, at the moment of resurrection brings with himself every man to whom he was assimilated. In this way he renders all men the sons of God and, as a consequence, brothers among themselves. Universal brotherhood is then the logical corollary to the Christian relational paradigm.



## **6.5 The twelve points of collective spirituality**

Article 8 of the General Statute of the Work of Mary lists twelve pivotal concepts on which the collective spirituality is based. According to the Focolare movement, the twelve points written personally by Chiara Lubich, were ‘donated’ to her by God, according to His will and each one of them represents that ‘something extra’ that is required to all the members of the Focolare who follow the path of unity. In fact, the sequence of the twelve points shows that they are directed at achieving the presence of Jesus in the midst.

The first point is God-Love that is, the awareness of being immeasurably loved by God. This means recognising the presence of God and of His love in every emotion felt, in every person met and in every circumstance and event of life, be it joyful or painful. The perception of God-Love brings with itself the discernment that God is not far, inaccessible and extraneous to people’s life, but He, on the contrary, looks for and reaches every single person on earth with the immensity of His love. According to Lubich, the understanding that God is love is particularly needed in our times, when an atheistic and secularized way of looking at the world has resulted in a painful search for the meaning of the existence and has generated a critique of the perception of God as unattainable, distant, unperturbed and passive (Lubich, 2002: 31-34).

The second point is the will of God. The only possible response to a God that loves people so immensely is to try to love Him back. And to love God means to do his will. It is the respect of God’s will that brings unity among people. Lubich expresses this concept through the metaphor of the sunlight’s rays: ‘Look at the sun and its rays. The sun is the symbol of Divine Will, which is God Himself. The rays are divine will extended on everybody. Walk towards the sun in the light of your ray, different and distinct from all the others and carry out the marvellous, peculiar plan that God has drafted for you. There is an infinite number of rays, all coming from the one sun; there is one will which is specific for every single person. The more the rays get close to the sun, the more they get close to each other. It is the same for us [...] the more we get close to God through the increasingly perfect compliance to His will, the more we get close to each other [...] until we all become one’ (Lubich, 2002: 35).

The third point is the love for the neighbour. According to Lubich, if the will of God is God himself, and if God is Love, then the will of God is love. The will of God is that people love Him with all of their heart, soul, and mind, and that they love their neighbour as themselves (Mt, 22: 37-39). As Lubich underlines, when the Focolare movement started, the word ‘love’

was not used frequently in the Catholic language; the word 'compassion' was preferred instead and it was mostly used in the reductive meaning of charity. The inspiration the first Focolarine had and the direct connection they established with the Word and the Love of God were imprinting a different and innovative form to the Catholic discourse and practice. Commenting on the words of Saint Paul 'To the weak I become weak, to win the weak. I have to become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some' (1 Corinthians, 9:22), Lubich explains that this 'becoming one with all people' requires the continuous death of ourselves. If loved in this way, the neighbour sooner or later is conquered by Christ who lives in us on the death of our 'I'. When this happens, the brother responds to our love with his love and the love for the neighbour becomes reciprocal (Lubich, 2002: 37-39).

The fourth point is the word of life. It is, as stated above, the exercise of 'living' – that is, putting into practice – a verse of the Bible. The practice has to be so perfect that that the believer reaches the stage where he incarnates the word of life. However, embodying the word of God individually is not enough. It is necessary to discuss among brothers the feelings and events individually experienced while turning the Gospel into action. In this way the member of the Focolare is evangelised, that is, he becomes Jesus because, on the one hand, he makes an effort to actualise the word of God, and, on the other hand, he receives the light and the experience of the other (Lubich, 2002: 39-41). Thus, the practice of the word of life is a spiritual exercise that allows members of the community to become Jesus both individually and collectively.

The fifth point is mutual love. Starting from the verse 'All I have is yours and all you have is mine' (John, 17:10), Lubich argues that members of the movement have to try to imitate the life of the Holy Trinity, by loving one another just like the Persons of the Holy Trinity love each other. Intra-Trinitarian life is made of total and eternal communion between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The same kind of Trinitarian relationship has to be established among men. As Lubich writes: 'I felt that I was created as a gift to my neighbor, just like my neighbor was created as a gift by God for me. In the same way in the Trinity the Father is everything to the Son and the Son is everything to the Father' (Lubich, 2002: 43).

The sixth and the seventh points are, respectively, Jesus forsaken and Unity, which were already discussed in the above paragraphs. The eighth point is Jesus in the midst, which is the grace obtained thanks to unity. If two or more people are united in the name of God, Jesus is

among them. When this happens, Jesus in the midst gives to the believers united in his love the strength and the endurance that they did not have as individual persons and that they need to have if they want to do the Will of God (Lubich, 2002: 47-52). The ninth point is the Eucharist. In the movement the Eucharist is not seen only as the food that nourishes the soul, but also as a practice conducive, once again, to unity. The Eucharist, indeed, makes the people that participate in it 'one' because it creates a blood and flesh relation among them and between them and Jesus. With the Eucharist, then, the unity is not just spiritual anymore, but becomes corporal (Lubich, 2002: 52-53).

The tenth point is the Church. The Church is not intended simply as the physical place of worship or the Vatican hierarchical structure, but as the spirit of communion that ties the believers to each other. To live the Church as communion means to establish relationships of charity and compassion among all of its parts, that is, among its members, its structures (dioceses, parishes, movements and commissions) and the realities connected to it (other Christian churches or other religions). Moreover, it is important that a bond of charity is built between superiors and parishioners, in a way that superiors put compassion before each command (Lubich, 2002: 53-56).

The eleventh point is Mary. Lubich underlines that the devotion for the mother of Jesus has always been very profound among Catholics, but has always been expressed as individual dedication to the Virgin. In the movement, instead, Mary is not only venerated, but also imitated and she is viewed as the 'Mother of Unity' that is, not only the mother of individual Christians, but also the mother of the Church. She is the bond of unity because, as a mother, she makes all sons and daughters, brothers and sisters with each other. To imitate Mary means to replicate on earth her spiritual maternity (which becomes spiritual paternity for men); this maternity moulds the people entrusted to it in order to make them saint and to unite them with each other and with God (Lubich, 2001: 56-60).

The twelfth and last point is the Holy Spirit; as a bond of unity between the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is the unifying force among Christians. Adherents to the Movement try constantly to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit within themselves and believe that it is especially important to learn to distinguish His voice when they are united and Jesus is in their midst, because this exercise perfects individual and solitary forms of listening. For the Focolarini it is this collective attempt at feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit that imbues

every meeting of the movement with a peculiar and unique atmosphere (Lubich, 2002: 60-61).

## **6.6 The Movement for Unity in Politics**

As mentioned above, although the Focolare is primarily a religious movement, it has been involved in many aspects of social life from education to economics and politics. Here I would like to concentrate on the movement's views and activities in the field of politics in order to attempt a description of the religiously grounded civic engagement it advocates. The Focolare has a branch that specifically directs the community's contribution to politics: the Movement for Unity in Politics (*Movimento Politico per l'Unità*). The Movement was founded in Naples, Italy, in May 1996, by Lubich in collaboration with a group of politicians who had been spiritually attracted by the charisma of unity since the 1950s. Politicians who followed Lubich gathered around Igino Giordani, a Parliament representative and member of the Constituent Assembly who promulgated the 1948 Italian Constitution and was the co-founder of the Focolare movement. After years of living the spirituality of unity at various levels of political commitment and serving as local and provincial administrator or as parliament representatives, they thought that the time was ripe to create some practical guidelines from their experience, which could be of use to other politicians in the country, and thus the Movement was born (Lubich, 2007: 235-237 and 254-255).

According to Lubich, the goal of the Movement is to 'bring Jesus to the Parliament' in the sense of 'helping people and groups involved in politics to rediscover the profound, eternal values of the human person, to put fraternity at the basis of their lives and only then to move on to political action' (Lubich, 2007: 260). The movement thus aims to include administrators, members of Parliament, party activists, and citizens. It embraces all the people that intend to build 'common good in the unity of the social body' (Lubich, 2007: 267): citizens who want to be involved politically, students and political analysts who want to contribute with their expertise to the wellbeing of society and local government officers who want to build unity starting from their communities.

On the official website of the Movement for Unity in Politics it is stated that, while the idea of Universal Fraternity, which the movement endorses, is not new, what is innovative in its outlook is the commitment to pursue it as a political concept and to promote it as the pillar on

which institutions are built (<http://www.mppu.org/en/about-us/the-ideas.html>). According to the website, its aims are the following: ‘to develop an approach to politics grounded in what is essentially a spiritual and widely shared idea: unity; to affirm the principle of fraternity in every way, through activities, policies, laws, rights, and duties, and to bring this principle into the reform of local, national and international institutions; to organize activities, seminars, laboratories, awareness-raising campaigns and conventions to all those involved in politics, diplomacy, public administration or the political sciences; to create opportunities for constructive political dialogue where the views of all are respected [...]; to promote a culture of participation, so that political decisions at all levels are the result of ideas and choices made with proper decision making processes’ (<http://www.mppu.org/en/about-us/goals.html>).

In concrete terms, the movement participates in national or international conferences and meetings aimed at political dialogue among different factions or parties within one country or among representatives of different countries. Moreover, thanks to a network of schools belonging to the movement and located in several countries, it organises courses, seminars, workshops and conferences aimed at promoting its vision of politics. The end goal is not primarily the formation of political leaders but the growth of a responsible civil society able to facilitate the processes of democratisation (<http://www.mppu.org/en/schools/for-young-people.html>). The specific objectives of these educational activities, aimed above all at young people, are ‘to offer analysis and intervention in the social and political fields which are suited to current challenges’ and ‘to constitute forums for ideas and political initiatives in city spaces for communitarian formation, where young people can learn and exercise their rights and duties of citizenship with competence, starting from one’s own territory’ (<http://www.mppu.org/en/schools/goals.html>).

The discourses and activities of the movement are inspired by Lubich’s views on politics, which I will now try to summarise. Lubich affirms that the Focolare does not conflate religion and politics and that it recognises the different roles played by the two, each with its own area of expertise. However, she claims, it is not possible to consider Jesus as a purely religious fact. It would indeed be a heresy to separate Jesus for the totality of human life and to think that the Gospel reveals the kingdom of God intended in a strictly religious sense. This attitude, instead of making people the partakers of God’s authority, would make them slaves to something beneath them, relegating the Father to a place far away from them. In this context, she differentiates between the ‘historical Jesus’ and the ‘Jesus-us’ that is, the Jesus present in each person. While the first does not have solution to today’s problems, the second

has answers regarding every aspect of human life in every historical era. Jesus-us is the true and most profound personality of every person; it is the element that, by making people a part of Christ's Mystical Body, provides contributions to every field of society, including politics (Lubich, 2007: 240).

Every attempt to 'do politics' then has to be based on Jesus-us. Quoting Pope Paulus VI<sup>111</sup>, Lubich affirms that 'we need to put more religion into politics, more mysticism into practice, more wisdom into government, more unity among all' (Lubich, 2007: 235). Putting religion into politics for Lubich means first of all to bring the Love-God into the political realm. In this regard she writes: 'Political action goes from interpersonal love to the possibility of a greater love, which reaches out to the entire *polis*. In acquiring a political dimension, this love does not lose its peculiar characteristic: the involvement of the whole person, with the intelligence and the will to reach everyone; the intuition and the imagination to take the first step; the realism to put oneself in the other person's shoes; the capacity to give oneself without hope of personal gain and to open up new paths of dialogue even when human limitations and failures would seem to block them' (Lubich, 2007: 262). This shift from the love for the neighbour to the love for the *polis* represents an incremental growth of solidarity and charity, in which the compassion taught to men by Jesus is extended from the relation between individuals into the entire social body.

As hinted at above, in Lubich's view God gives authority to human beings as his delegates in the world (Jn 19:11) and this authority should be used as an instrument of truth and love. Moreover, such authority is given by a Lord who is Love and Trinity and this brings about two fundamental social facts. First, authority participates in the love of the Creator for each created being. This means that every man bears in himself the indisputable dignity of being a creature of God and, as a consequence, has inalienable rights and duties. Second, the authority given by God to every human being is the source of the specific form of authority conferred upon political leaders for the government of the *polis*. Thus, those who govern have great responsibilities both before God and before the people. Since citizens are the original receiver of God's authority, they cannot be passive subjects, but must be actively involved in the political process and political power has to be put in their hands. Political activity of the governors must be met by intense and continual participation of citizens in the administration of public affairs, because 'it is only through this mutuality that it is possible to build the

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<sup>111</sup> Paolo VI (1964). *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*. Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

common good'. Such dynamic reciprocity derives from the Trinitarian relationship of the two parts (the human and the divine), which is harmonious unity in multiplicity (Lubich, 2007: 239). In a nutshell, both the rights and duties of citizens and their active participation in public affairs are advocated on the basis of the authority entrusted to them by God and this authority, precisely because it has its origin in God, must be exercised in accordance with His Love and His Trinitarian nature.

Lubich also considers the great political plan of modernity to be the motto of the French Revolution 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. However, she argues, while liberty and equality have been partially achieved, fraternity is in contemporary society the 'forgotten principle' (Baggio, 2007). And yet, without fraternity, equality and liberty cannot reach their deepest meaning, because only the person who sees the other as a brother or sister can recognise the other's full freedom and equality. The model for this way of envisioning politics is offered, once again, by Jesus forsaken. Just like Jesus on the cross, all men and women on earth are separated from the Father and hence divided among themselves. Just as the abandoned One re-abandoned Himself to the Father, by committing themselves to God, people are able to overcome divisions and engage in a dialogue with all. On these bases we can argue that in Lubich's view Jesus's experience of separation is what sets the grounds for political unity and the imitation of Christ is the source of civic virtues.

Daniela Ropelato and Antonio Maria Baggio, dwelling on these aspects of Lubich's thought, elaborate on the role that can be played in modern politics by the relational paradigm originating from the Trinitarian nature of God and from the suffering of Jesus forsaken. Ropelato argues that active participation to democracy and universal fraternity are intimately connected. In order to understand that, she claims, it is necessary to look at the two meanings of 'participation' as 'taking part' in a certain process, in the sense of collaboration, and 'being part' of a certain process, in the sense of belonging. There is a strong association between the two dimensions since people take part in something when they are part of that thing. The acceptance of the outcomes of the democratic decisional procedures will then depend on the citizens' sense of belonging to the social body. If citizens belong to a greater totality of which they are part, they also belong to each other; participation can then be described as a 'bond of reciprocal belonging'. It is this reciprocity, on which Lubich insists so much in her writings, that produces social integration and participation. As a consequence, it is necessary to make references in the contemporary political vocabulary to the concept of universal fraternity as a political idea that, together with freedom and equality, gives birth to normative prescriptions.

As a political project, universal fraternity puts forward the need for ‘horizontal’ relationships, rejects disparities and positions of strength among citizens, and seeks to establish harmony between unity and diversity within the social body (Ropelato, 2010: 40-43).

The horizontal logic of the political project of universal fraternity is brought about by the Trinitarian paradigm of Christianity. Baggio observes that the connection between the Father and the Son is not a one-to-one relationship: the very bond between the two is another Person, the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that people on earth receive when Jesus screams ‘God, why have you forsaken me?’, because Jesus in that moment, by experiencing the absence of the bond with the Father, deprives Himself of the Spirit. At the same time it is the Spirit that screams ‘Father’ when Jesus re-abandons Himself to God. This episode of the Gospel hints at a Trinitarian relationship that is a bond in which each one of the Three is fully Himself and at the same time has an identity that is hedged in the Other. From this derives the horizontal nature of the Christian relational paradigm: the Three are distinct but equal, because each one of them is God and the identity of each one of them is fully revealed in the relationship with the Other (Baggio 2012: 68-69).

As in the case of the Nur community the new political culture theorised by the Focolare does not give birth to a new political party. Instead it is aimed at changing the method of political activity. In this new culture politics is seen as a ‘vocation’ and as the ‘art of loving’. If politics is a vocation the response to the call is, once again, an act of brotherhood. People do not become involved in politics because they want to solve problems, but they want collective good as much as they want their own good. If politicians see their jobs in this way they will be able to devote their attention to the citizens, listen to their requests and serve their needs.

The basic principle of politics as the art of love is to live first of all as true Christians and then as people engaged in the political sphere. This principle requires that everyone is loved without exceptions and regardless of his party affiliation. Only the feeling of brotherhood can render politicians able to recognise that those who have made a political choice different from their own can be motivated by love as much as they are. In this way, while remaining faithful to their political ideas, they learn to respect other people’s political views as equally legitimate and to overcome disunity. The art of loving also requires that politicians deny themselves and take up other people’s crosses. In modern times – Lubich specifies – the crosses that afflict the political world are the harsh opposition between political parties, the fights between different ethnic and religious groups, and the hostility between nations.



Finally, it is important to notice that in the view of the Movement, the idea of politics as love does not bring about a static and contemplative attitude in the political sphere, but on the contrary hinges on action and produces concrete results. On this issue Lubich writes: ‘In fact politics seen as love creates and preserves those conditions that allow all the other types of love to flourish: the love of young people who want to get married and who need a house and employment, the love of those who want to study and who need schools and books, the love of those who run their own business and who needs roads and railways, clear and reliable laws [...] thus politics is the love of all loves, gathering the resources of people and groups into the unity of a common design so as to provide the means for each one to fulfil in complete freedom his or her specific vocation. But it also encourages people to co-operate, bringing together needs and resources, questions and answers, instilling mutual trust among all’ (Lubich, 2007: 254).

## **6.7 Divine diplomacy**

Drawing on Pope Pius XII’s definition of modern times as ‘the era of the Mystical Body’<sup>112</sup>, Lubich develops a view of international diplomacy based on the idea that in our age the love for the neighbour needs to be extended to love for other countries. This second form of love, however, can come into being only after the first one is fully achieved: only when the Mystical Body has been developed to the point that all the citizens really love the other as themselves, it will be possible to transfer this law to the relations among nations. Moreover, in order for people and their representatives, to go beyond their borders, they have to ‘immolate their collective egos’ (Lubich, 2007: 231), just like single men have to give up their individual selves if they want to be consumed in unity with their brothers. The diplomacy that is moved by the good of the other and is devoid of any shades of selfishness is Divine diplomacy. Its aim is to establish among States the same kind of relationships that should be established among people according to the Gospel.

For Lubich the feeling of brotherhood also lies at the foundation of the great project of the European Union. So is holiness, as demonstrated by the ongoing process of canonisation of Robert Shuman and Alcide De Gasperi, who combined in their lives the religious virtues derived from their faith and the civic virtues required by their profession as politicians.

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<sup>112</sup> On June 29, 1943 Pope Pius XII issued a papal encyclical entitled ‘*Mystici Corporis Christi*’ (On the Mystical Body of Christ), in which the Catholic Church was defined as the Mystical Body of Christ.

According to Lubich, the Founding of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was not only an economic arrangement but it was an agreement motivated by ‘solidarity in production’ that would prevent any war between the countries taking part in it and achieve peace and fraternity. However, the ultimate goal of the project started with the ECSC was not just the European Union, but the formation of a united world. In this utopic, virtuous process of unification the European family will contribute to the development of a universal family (Lubich, 2007: 249-251).

Finally, in Lubich’s view, the world’s desire for unity is demonstrated by the following social and political developments: the coming together of separate states, like in the case of the European Union; the role of international organisations, like the United Nations; the expansion of an ecumenical dialogue among Christians of different denominations; and the growth of religious ecclesial movements that have sprung up across the world over the last decades. The latter are particularly effective tools to achieve universal brotherhood because, being made up primarily of laypeople, they display a great interest for the affairs of this world and offer theoretical as well as practical contributions to the fields of politics, economics and society. These movements, each following its own path, live the gospel with authenticity and radicalism and, by doing so, turn love into action. Moreover, they form communities of people whose social, cultural and ethnic background vary greatly, thus becoming a prototype of a united world and showing, at the same time, that such a world is possible (Lubich, 2007: 252, 260). Here we find an element traceable also in the Nur movement: the idea that religious communities represent on a small scale a righteous model of society and constitute an example that can be followed by the entire social body to achieve self-renovation.

## **6.8 Conclusions**

It is possible to individuate four elements that the Nur community and the Focolare movement have in common: the formulation by their leaders of theological doctrines and political theories in a fashion that makes them accessible to people at grassroots level; the renovation of religious practices in a way that renders them apt to modern times, while simultaneously preserving orthodoxy; the call for a new form of religious commonality that allows the believer to find his true self by transcending his individuality; and the appeal to a return of metaphysics and spirituality in the political realm. I will synthetically delineate these four aspects.

First, both Said Nursi and Chiara Lubich had strongly charismatic personalities and displayed a great ability to talk to everybody and to communicate their theoretical elaborations to anyone, thus making theology understandable to non-theologians and accessible to the masses. Starting her reasoning from the verse of the Gospel of Matthew ‘No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him’ (Mt, 11:27), Lubich underlines that the majority of theologians of Western culture primarily thought of theology as a reflection on God and Jesus rather than a participation, through faith and love, in Jesus’ knowledge of the Father. According to her, Jesus gives this knowledge to his Mystical Body by way of the Spirit and it is possible for believers to receive this knowledge in its fullness when they are at ‘one’ in Him (Gal, 3:28). Given that this theology is a theology *of* Jesus (rather than a theology *on* Jesus), it sees everything from the perspective of the One where everything is in its true reality (Lubich, 2007: 204-209). In both the Focolare and the Nur Community knowledge of God is reachable not only because it is expressed in comprehensible terms by Lubich and Nursi, but also because it is obtained through participation in the movements’ religious practices: the Word of Life meetings and the *sohbets*. These collective cognitive exercises (and their derivative practices like the conferences organised by Nur foundations or the seminars promoted by the Movement for Unity in Politics) are what enable the interiorisation of theological-political views by adherents and the transformation of the latter into practice. It is in this tension between intellectual absorption and practical engagement that (Christian or Islamic) socio-political imaginaries are formed.

Second, just as Said Nursi defines the previous era as the ‘age of individuality’, to which the current ‘age of collective personality’ is opposed, Lubich differentiates between the individual spirituality of the past and the collective spirituality of the present. For both scholars it is indeed the modern age that requires new forms of collectivity and spirituality, which in turn give rise to new, unconventional social formations: a community gathered around a religious text rather than a Sufi *sheikh*, in the case of Nur students, and an ecclesial movement led by a laywoman in the case of the Focolarini. These innovative forms of social cohesion are an evolution, rather than a rejection, of the religious practices of the past and represent a reaction to the anomie and rampant individualism of modern society. Moreover, while renewing religious traditions and proposing new interpretations of the Scriptures, these movements remain anchored in what are considered to be the eternal truths of revelation, as demonstrated

by the extreme orthodoxy of Nursi's reading of the Quran and by Lubich's obedience to the norms and dictates of the Catholic Church.

Third, this new spiritual collectiveness requires the abandonment of the self, a process that is articulated in the Risale in terms of 'annihilation into the brother' and in Lubich's writings in terms of 'becoming one in the Mystical Body of Christ'. Mystical and communitarian feelings, expressed in the form of '*shahs-i manevi*' or of 'Jesus in the midst', give to the believers a spiritual strength and an ability to reach God that they do not have individually. The attainment of a collective personality or of Jesus in the midst can be considered as one of those moments that Durkheim defines as 'collective effervescence', that is, those situations when 'the power of the group is experienced so intensely that a new level of collective awareness eventually comes to supersede the isolated, fragmented consciousness of the everyday life' (Töle, 1993: 10). However, this powerful result is obtained only if the believer renounces the 'I' and, by emptying himself, becomes able to receive in his heart the other and, eventually, God. The eradication of the 'selfish self' brings to a renewed selfhood experienced in its fullness and pureness.

Forth, both communities were founded at a time of crisis and were the result of traumatic experiences: the Second World War for the Focolare movement, and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire for the Nur community. Both Nursi's and Lubich's reflections on the needs of men in modern times are very much influenced by a sense of crisis and by what they perceive to be an erosion of values and traditions, not only in the private sphere but also in the public realms. As a solution to this situation, they provide a normative theory of society and politics founded on theological concepts that assume in their writings a political meaning and develop a new understanding of citizenship in which religious and civic virtues are conflated.

Finally, it is important to underline that by comparing the Focolare and the Nur community I do not intend to argue that there are similarities in the theological components of the two movements' socio-political imaginaries. In an extreme synthesis and simplification, the theological foundations of Nursi's elaboration on the political are the absolute oneness of God, the total submission to Allah and the establishment of a Master/slave relationship between the believer and his Lord. For Lubich, instead, seminal religious notions are the Trinitarian nature of God, the love for the neighbour, and the establishment of a Father/son relationship between the believer and God. From these very basic principles of beliefs depart separate lines of reasoning that, passing through different historical references – the first four

Caliphs and the great Ottoman Sultans for Nur students and the Greek *polis* and the French Revolution for the Focolarini – bring to distinctive (Islamic and Christian) conceptualisations of ethical governance and common good. What I think would be fruitful to analyse comparatively is the cognitive process that links the interiorisation of certain Divine truths to the formation of certain socio-political views and the transformation of newly founded spirituality into political action. Such a comparison would shed light on a larger phenomenon of religious renovation and return to foundational politics typical of the (re-enchanted) contemporary world.



## Conclusions

In this thesis I have presented an in-depth analysis of Nur students' socio-political imaginary and I have assessed how the latter is embedded into practice. I used the notion of social imaginary in the way it was articulated by Charles Taylor. According to the author, a social imaginary is the transformation of social theory into the profound normative notions and imaginaries that enable common people's practice of society. Along the process, the scholar argues, imagination and action shape each other. I have argued that the employment of this analytical tool in an ethnographic study of an Islamist community allows the researcher to fill in a gap of time and space existing in the literature about political Islam.

From a temporal point of view, the missing piece is the formulation and transmission of an Islamic political project before mobilisation around that project takes place. Moreover, the concept of social imaginary allows the researcher to see discourse and practice as mutually sustaining elements that together define a social actor's function within the society. Unravelling this dynamic interplay means going back and forth, both temporally and cognitively, between imagination and action and recognising that the discourse in itself can be shaped by the social space for which it claims it provides a map. The community's adaptation to the Turkish institutional context and its complex narrative on politics are examples of this double-layered influence.

From a spatial point of view, the missing piece is the intermediate level of cognition existing between the scholarly theorisation about society promoted by the learned elite and based on religious sciences and the masses' practical knowledge of the social realm constituted by an incoherent set of instinctive beliefs and judgments. This midway knowledge, which I argued can be defined as a social imaginary, derives its persuasive power precisely from its being 'in between', in that it displays the logical coherence and the theological depth of the knowledge that is above it and the accessibility and immediacy of the knowledge that is below it. In my case study the locus where scholarly knowledge meets common knowledge to give rise to a social imaginary is the *sohbet*. The fact that during *sohbets*, Nur students express social theory and theology in the form of tales, allegories and references to the everyday life testifies to this encounter.

The analysis of Muslim actors' socio-political imaginary can be extended beyond the borders of Turkey. The specific content of this thesis is confined to the Nur community's imaginary, but its methodology can be applied to the study of Muslims' worldviews around the globe. Putting an emphasis on participants' self-understanding calls for an approach to the study of Islamic political phenomena that engages the actors' ideas in their own terms. Simultaneously, insisting on the centrality of the cognitive processes unfolding at grassroots level is a methodological argument in favour of evaluations that do not take for granted the meaning attributed by rank-and-file social agents to concepts and ideas invoked during political debates and actions.

Besides that, the thesis makes two more methodological points: one with regard to modern rationality and the other with regard to the contemporary debate about Islam and democracy. The religious revival experienced by both non-Western and Western societies over the last decades has forced a revision of the secularisation hypothesis. Although it is now broadly acknowledged in the social sciences that the equation of modernisation with secularisation is false, it is still not clear what this implies about the supposed rationality of contemporary societies and the religious formations that thrive in them.

A significant part of the Risale deals with this subject. It would indeed be unfair to think that the efforts of Said Nursi are exclusively directed towards filling the spot left empty by Kemalism. In Nursi's writings, it is possible to find across numerous examples showing that he understood that the weakening of faith was a problem that affected the entire world, not just Turkey. The issue for him is the general anomie and loss of foundational certainties caused in modern man by industrial civilization and its base in rationalist philosophy. The fact that he continuously dwells on meaning, presents Islam as a religion that has to be understood, and provides logical proofs to Divine truths in itself shows this. Said Nursi sees the origin of contemporary social problems in the emancipation of reason from faith and, accordingly, offers a critique of the Western rationalist discourse that has posited reason alone as the ultimate source of truth, knowledge, and authority.

To the perceived attacks against faith launched by atheism and rationalism Nursi reacts with what is, in fact, a modernisation project: the Risale-i Nur. In his writings and preaching the scholar aims at adapting Islamic educational methods, reasoning, practices, ethical training, and modes of cohesiveness to modern times. He does not do so by making them compatible with the secular-liberal system of thought deemed to be constitutive of modernity, but by



reasserting the validity (and supremacy) of Islamic rationality, both from a logical and from a moral point of view. Adaptation to modernity, then, does not mean for him adopting bureaucratic forms derived from a western style of thinking, but providing Muslim society with the necessary tools to challenge the institutional arrangements and methods of knowledge production that, according to the modernisation paradigm, they are supposed to abide to. My methodological point here is that in order to grasp the full relevance of alternative modernities it is necessary to recognise that the latter are sustained by alternative rationalities and to engage in a serious unprejudiced study of these different logical systems.

However, while the aim of research in this field should be that of acknowledging the cogency and internal coherence of non-Western systems of thought, it is important to underline that, in the case of the Nur students, the critique of secular rationalism does not leave space for an ecumenical view on different routes to scientific knowledge, but aims instead at substituting one form of rationality with another. In fact, Nur students do not abolish the hierarchy among different kinds of knowledge, but simply reverse it. In other words, they consider divinely inspired knowledge as the only possible rational, truthful, and legitimate interpretation of the world and, consequently, regard any worldview that does not hinge on faith as mistaken, illogical, immoral, and ultimately false.

Regarding the issue of Islam and democracy, my work is in line with that of researchers who have criticised the classical method of evaluating democratisation in Muslim societies. Some authors have provocatively pointed out the irrelevance of the question about the compatibility of Islam and democracy, since nothing in Islam makes it ‘inherently democratic or undemocratic’ (Bayat, 2007:4). Others have noticed the worthlessness of the speculations about the bone fides of Islamic political actors who claim to be in favour of democracy, since Islamist parties can act in a democratic or authoritarian way according to circumstances, just like any other party does (Masoud, 2008). While agreeing with both scholars, I have also proposed a constructive approach that aims at assessing the Islamic ‘route’ to democracy through an analysis of Islamic socio-political imaginaries.

Putting the theory of democracy within the general context of the Islamic political theology and assessing the meaning that this theory has for Muslims at grassroots level allows me to overcome three shortcomings of the literature on Islam and democracy. First, it helps to understand what exactly lay Muslims mean when they say they want democracy and to what point the latter represents for a source of normative commitment. Second, by connecting the

idea of democracy to wider religious doctrines about the individual and Allah, it avoids looking for concepts in the Islamic tradition that can justify Western democracy. Third, by analysing the different components that together make up the concept of democracy, it presents a complex picture that goes beyond the simplistic distinction between a moderate Islam that accepts democratic procedures and a radical Islam that rejects them.

Following this method I have demonstrated that for Nur students a democratic attitude is a value that necessarily stems from faith and that they regard democracy as something that Muslims *need* to establish if they want to live as true believers. I have also shown that the all-encompassing nature of Islam and the total submission of the believer to Allah, considered in some culturalist works as a hindrance to democratisation in Muslim societies, are, in fact, the foundations on which Nursi's theory of democracy is built. Finally, I have underlined that sincerely endorsing democracy does not imply (or require) having a secular-liberal understanding of freedom and justice and I have pointed out that, in the light of the community's advocacy of 'moderate' means – peaceful Islamization within the respect of secular democratic institutions – for 'radical' ends – the establishment of an Islamic state and implementation of shari'a – the dichotomy between radical and moderate Islam loses its significance.

Another point worth noting is that commendation of democracy does not automatically bring about acceptance of the different views and ideas existing along the political spectrum. Jillian Schwedler in her work about the process of moderation that Islamist parties might undergo if allowed equal, free and fair participation in the political elections, defines moderation not as a change in political behaviour, but as a change in ideology 'from a rigid and closed worldview to one relatively more open and tolerant of alternative perspectives' (Schwedler, 2006: 22). While this might have been the case for the Jordan and Yemenite Islamist parties that Schwedler studied, it certainly did not happen in the case of the Nur Cemaati. Indeed, in the movements' discourse Islamic rationality and Islamic ethics are deemed universal and any outlook not based on the latter is considered illegitimate. Prominent community members' statements against the Gezi Park protestors, very much reminiscent of the anti-communist rhetoric used by movement in the '60s and '70s, featured a severe denigration of the political adversary, portrayed as an enemy of the nation and as a bearer of anarchy and immorality. The attitude toward the opponents displayed by the community in the past and in more recent times warns against considering a genuine approval of democratic procedures intrinsically devoid of authoritarian tendencies.

Finally, throughout the dissertation I have emphasised that in Nur students' worldview there is no contradiction between being good Muslims and being good citizens; on the contrary religious and civic virtues are mutually sustained. To better develop this aspect, in the last chapter I have attempted to outline new research perspectives by drawing a shadow comparison between the Nur Community and the Italian Catholic Focolare Movement. By proposing this research agenda I am not claiming that Islamic and Christian theologies should be compared; what I am arguing for is instead a parallel assessment of the process through which Christian and Islamic theologies, thanks to the ritual of collective meditation on the Scriptures, percolate down to ordinary believers and generate Christian and Islamic socio-political imaginaries. Accordingly, the brief comparative analysis presented in the chapter revolved around the development by the two movements of new religious practices, new forms of spiritual cohesiveness, and new faith-based approaches to citizenship. These three elements together give rise to a new, modern type of religiosity; in both case studies they are indeed seen as the most effective response to the challenges posed to men by modernity, namely anomie, individualism and the loss of foundational certainties.

Central to both movements are two ideational resources: the idea that individuals can find their true selves only in communion with others and a call for a reconsideration of the role that metaphysics can play in the public realm. The two aspects, apparently disconnected, are in fact tied to each other. By being part of a religious community the individual learns to go beyond himself, becomes at one with his brothers, reaches the presence of God, and along the way attains a morally higher form of consciousness. This spiritual union is subsequently extended to the entire social body, in a view that regards the community as a righteous model for society. Moreover, the ethical advancement reached in the mystical union with the other is transferred into the political realm and turned into political action. As a consequence, the establishment of a metaphysically defined common good is not envisioned simply as the enforcement of the Divine order of things, but also as a communion of intents and dispositions among divinely inspired citizens.

In the social sciences we have very few conceptual tools to investigate spirituality as a constitutive element of the political. I have argued that probably the best way to start building the analytical resources we miss is to look at Durkheim's theory of religion and society and at his later work on the transformation of religion in highly modern contexts. Durkheim's conceptualisation of moments of 'collective effervescence' that allow the individual to transcend his insulated consciousness and the emphasis the author puts on the need for

collective feelings and shared beliefs to preserve the unity of society and its moral order can help to account for the individual and collective transformation invoked by religious movements in late-modern society.

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# APPENDIX A

## LIST OF INTERVIEWS<sup>113</sup>

### Yeni Nesil

Code	Name	Age	Profession	Position within the group and type of engagement	Place of the interview	Time of the interview
<b>YNIst01 (F)</b>	-----	early 30s	Studied public management, now works as an editor at Nesil Yayınları	Deep commitment at grassroots level/ work on concepts	Istanbul	22-11-2012
<b>YNIst02 (F)</b>	-----	Mid 20s	Nurse	Loose commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	14-03-2013
<b>YNIst03 (F)</b>	-----	Early 50s	Pharmacist	Loose commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	16-03-2013
<b>YNIst04</b>	-----	Early 40s	Public servant, works for one of the Istanbul municipalities	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	22-11-2012
<b>YNIst05</b>	-----	Early 30s	Sound engineer, works as a speaker at Moral Radio	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	29-11-2012
<b>YNIst06</b>	-----	Late 20s	Studied Turkish Literature Works at Yeni Nesil and works on concepts	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	15-11-2012

<sup>113</sup> I thank İpek Gencil Sezgin for agreeing to the use in this work of the interviews coding system employed in her Ph.D. dissertation (Gencil Sezgin, 2011).

<b>YNIst07</b>	Safa Mursel	Mid60s	Lawyer	Deep commitment at leadership level	Istanbul	23-02-2013
<b>YNIst08</b>	-----	Late 50s	Studied theology, worked as a journalist and consultant	Political leadership, connection to the group through family links	Istanbul	12-10-2012
<b>YNIst09</b>	Yavuz Bahadıroğlu	Early70s	Writer of historical novel	Deep commitment at leadership level	Istanbul	15-11-2012
<b>YNIst10</b>	-----	Late 40s	teacher	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	22-11-2012
<b>YNIst11</b>	-----	Late 20s	Worked in several companies now works for a publishing house	Loose commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	14-12-2012
<b>YNIst12</b>	-----	Early 40s	Works for Nesil publishing house	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	14-12-2012
<b>YNIst13</b>	-----	Early 60s	Director of Moral Radio	Commitment at leadership level	Istanbul	05-12-2012
<b>YNIst14</b>	-----	Mid50s	Teacher	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	06-12-2012
<b>YNIst15</b>	-----	Early 60s at the time of the interview now passed away	Devoted his life to the hizmet within the community	Vakıf	Istanbul	08-12-2012
<b>YNIst17</b>	Firinci Abi	Mid 80s	Used to work in a bakery	Ağabey	Istanbul	27-10-2012
<b>YNIst18</b>	-----	Early 30s	Devoted his life to the hizmet	Vakıf	Istanbul	16-10-2012
<b>YNIst19</b>	-----	Late 20s	Devoted his life to the hizmet	Vakıf	Istanbul	16-10-2012

<b>YNIst20</b>	-----	Early 20s	Student of law	Deep commitment at grassroots level/connection to the cemaat through family links	Istanbul	April 2012
<b>YNIst21 (F)</b>	-----	Early 40s	Used to be a teacher, now works for YN Publishing House	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	24-07-2013
<b>YNIst22</b>	-----	Early 60s	Studied theology in Saudi Arabia, now works for Nesil Publishing House	Deep commitment at leadership level level	Istanbul	24-07-2013
<b>YNIzm01</b>	-----	Early 20s	University student	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Izmir	01-04-2013

### Yeni Asya

<b>YAIst01</b>	-----	Early 30s	Studied education science, now works as a journalist	Deep commitment at grassroots level/connection to the community through family links	Istanbul	26-02-2013
<b>YAIst02</b>	Kazim Gulecyuz	Late 50s	Editor of the Yeni Asya Newspaper	Intellectual Leadership	Istanbul	12-02-2013
<b>YAIst03</b>	-----	Early 50s	Retired teacher now works at Bizim Radio	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	20-03-2013
<b>YAIst04</b>	-----	Late 40s	Teacher and editor of Kopru Magazine	Deep commitment at grassroots level/connection to the community through family links	Istanbul	20-02-2013
<b>YAIst05</b>	Islam Yasar	Early 70s	Studied Turkish literature/Writer	Intellectual leadership	Istanbul	22-02-2013

<b>YAIst06</b>	-----	Early 60s	Studied history/ works as a journalist for Yeni Asya	Intellectual leadeship	Istanbul	07-02-2013 12-03-2013
<b>YAIst07</b>	-----	Early 40s	Studied chemistry/ director of Bizim Radio	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	20-02-2013
<b>YAIst08</b>	-----	Early 30s	Works for a food company	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	02-03-2013
<b>YAIst09 (F)</b>	-----	Mid 50s	Housewife Collaborates with the YA magazine for women	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	19-07-2013
<b>YAIst10</b>	-----	Early 70s	Retired textile worker, now works in the archive of Yeni Asya	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	19-07-2013
<b>YAAnk01</b>	-----	Early 60s	Teacher, DYP parliament representative for Hatay in early 90s	Deep commitment at grassroots and political level	Ankara	25-05-2013
<b>YAIsp01</b>	-----	Late 50s	Retired army general	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Isparta	06-04-2013
<b>YAIsp03</b>	-----	Early 40s	University Professor	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Isparta	06-04-2013
<b>YAIzm01</b>	-----	Late 60s	Businessmen	Deep commitment at leadership and political level	Izmir	01-04-2013 04-04-2013
<b>YAIzm02 (F)</b>	-----	Late 60s	Used to be a nurse now runs a kinder garden	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Izmir	02-04-2013
<b>YAIzm03</b>	-----	Late 60s	Runs a publishing house/ DYP Parliament representative for Izmir in the 90s	Deep commitment at grassroots and political level	Izmir	04-04-2013

<b>YATir01</b>	-----	Late 70s	Shopkeeper	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Tire	03-04-2013
<b>YATir02</b>	-----	Late 60s	Public servant	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Tire	03-04-2013
<b>YATir03</b>	-----	Early 60s	Shopkeeper	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Tire	03-04-2013
<b>YAMar01</b>	-----	Late 70s	Peasant	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Mardin	18-04-2013

### Meşveret

<b>Code</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Position within the group and type of engagement</b>	<b>Place of the interview</b>	<b>Time of the interview</b>
<b>MesIst01</b>	-----	Early 50s	University Professor of Theology	Intellectual leadership	Istanbul	29-11-2012
<b>MesIst02</b>	-----	Early 60s	Engineer, worked as a public servant in various municipality administrations	Deep commitment at grassroots level/Mayor of Bingol for RP in the 90s	Istanbul	26-03-2013
<b>MesIst03</b>	-----	Early 60s	Public servant	Loose commitment at grassroots level/Mayor of Van for RP in the 90s	Istanbul	09-04-2013
<b>MesAnk01</b>	Said Ozdemir	Mid80s	Diyanet employee/resigned to devote his life to hizmet	Ağabey	Ankara	24-05-2013
<b>MesDiy01</b>	-----	Early 70s	Molla	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Diyarbakir	20-04-2013

<b>MesErz01</b>	-----	Mid 60s	Retired public servant	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Erzurum	23-05-2013
<b>MesErz02</b>	-----	Late 70s	Shoopkeeper	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Erzurum	23-05-2013
<b>MesErz03</b>	Kirkinci Hoca	Early 80s	Molla/Devoted his life to hizmet	Ağabey	Erzurum	22-05-2013
<b>MesGaz01</b>	-----	Late 50s	Retired army general	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Gaziantep	15-04-2013
<b>MesGaz02</b>	-----	Mid 40s	University Professor	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Gaziantep	15-04-2013
<b>MesGaz03</b>	-----	Mid 50s	University Professor	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Gaziantep	14-04-2013
<b>MesIsp01</b>	-----	Early 70s	Public servant	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Isparta	06-04-2013
<b>MesIsp02</b>	-----	Late 20s	Devoted his life to hizmet	Vakıf	Isparta	07-04-2013
<b>MesIsp03</b>	-----	Early 30s	Devoted his life to hizmet	Vakıf	Isparta	07-04-2013
<b>MesIzm01</b>	-----	Early 60s	Shopkeeper	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Izmir	02-04-2013
<b>MesIzm02</b>	-----	Late 70	Devoted his life to hizmet	Vakıf	Izmir	02-04-2013
<b>MesUrf01</b>	Badilli Abi	Early 80s	Devoted his life to hizmet	Ağabey	Urfa	18-04-2013
<b>MesVan01</b>	-----	Mid 50s	University professor	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Van	24-04-2013
<b>MesVan 02</b>	-----	Early 50s	University professor	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Van	24-04-2013
<b>MesVan03</b>	-----	Early 80s	Molla	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Van	24-04-2013

## Med Zehra

Code	Name	Age	Profession	Position within the group and type of engagement	Place of the interview	Time of the interview
<b>MedIst01</b>	-----	Early 70s	Public servant, now retired	Deep commitment at leadership level	Istanbul Urfa	12-14-2013 16-04-2013
<b>MedIst02</b>	-----	Late 20s	Student of sociology/works for Nubihar magazine	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	09-03-2013
<b>MedIst03</b>	-----	Mid 40s	Studied public communication/editor of Nubihar magazine	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Istanbul	01-03-2013
<b>MedAnk01</b>	-----	Late 40s	Works for a Kurdish television	Deep commitment at grassroots and intellectual level	Ankara	24-05-2013
<b>MedAnk02</b>	-----	Mid 40s	Studied theology/ -----	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Ankara	25-05-2013
<b>MedAnk03</b>	-----	Late 20s	Lawyer	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Ankara	25-05-2013
<b>MedSii01</b>	-----	Late 20s	Public servant	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Siirt	21-04-2013
<b>MedDiy01</b>	-----	Late 20s	Devoted his life to the hizmet	Vakıf	Diyarbakir	19-04-2013
<b>MedDiy02</b>	-----	Mid 60s	Molla	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Diyarbakir	20-04-2013
<b>MedMar01</b>		Early 40s	University professor	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Mardin	19-04-2013

<b>MedUrf01</b>	-----	Mid 50s	Administrator of an hospital	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Urfa	16-04-2013
<b>MedUrf02</b>	-----	Early 50s	Shoopkeeper	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Urfa	17-04-2013
<b>MedVan01</b>	-----	Mid 40s	Adminostrator of a school	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Van	24-04-2013
<b>MedVan02</b>	-----	Mid 40s	Teacher	Deep commitment at grassroots level	Van	24-04-2013

### Zehra

<b>Code</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Position within the group and type of engagement</b>	<b>Place of the interview</b>	<b>Time of the interview</b>
<b>ZehIst01</b>	Muhammed Siddiq	Mid 80s	Devoted his life to the hizmet within the community	Agabey	Istanbul	08-12-2012

### Independents

<b>Code</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Position within the group and type of engagement</b>	<b>Place of the interview</b>	<b>Time of the interview</b>
<b>IndIst01</b>	-----	Mid 50s	University Professor of Turkish Literature and TV show host	Intellectual leadership	Istanbul	22-11-2012 14-02-2013



<b>IndIst02</b>	Metin Karabaşoğlu	Late 50s	Studied political science/ writer	Intellectual leadership	Istanbul	28-02-2013
<b>IndIst03</b>	-----	Early 40s	Medical doctor	Loose commitment at grassroots level/ connection to the cemaat through family links	Istanbul	11-12-2012 08-02-2013
<b>IndIst04</b>	-----	Early 40s	Journalist, writer	Intellectual leadership/ connection to the cemaat through family links	Istanbul	08-02-2013
<b>IndIst05</b>	Ummit Simsek	Mid 60s	Writer	Intellectual leadership	Istanbul	12-11-2012
<b>IndAnk01</b>	-----	Mid 40s	Works for the Research Commission of the Turkish Parliament	Commitment at intellectual level	Ankara	24-05-2013

### Externals

<b>Code</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Position within the group and type of engagement</b>	<b>Place of the interview</b>	<b>Time of the interview</b>
<b>ExtIst01</b>	Hasan Suver	Late 40s	Deputy Major of the Fatih Municipality	No connection with the community	Istanbul	October 2012
<b>ExtIst02</b>	Taha Akyol	Late 50s	Journalist for Yeni Safak	Friendship relations with community members	Istanbul	20-11-2012

<b>ExtIst03</b>	-----	Mid 50s	Presbyterian Priest	Studied in a Yeni Asya derslane in the 70s before converting to Christianity	Istanbul	04-12-2012
<b>ExtIst04 (F)</b>	-----	Late 20s	Teacher	Studied in a derslane before leaving and subsequently joining the Anticapitalist Muslims	Istanbul	24-07-2013
<b>ExtAnk01</b>	-----	Mid 70s	Retired university professor of Turkish Literature	Studied the Risale independently/ friendship relations with community members	Ankara	26-05-2013

## Appendix B



The General Directorate for Life-long Education of the Ministry of National Education (*Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı Hayat Boyu Öğrenme Genel Müdürlüğü*) working in collaboration with the Charity Foundation (*Hayrat Vakfı*), an institution belonging to the group of the Scribes within the Nur community, invites the population to enrol onto free Quran and Ottoman language lessons.

## Appendix C



**PANEL**  
**“Bir Rol Model Olarak**  
**Bediüzzaman Said Nursi”**

Fatih Belediyesi ve İstanbul İlim ve Kültür Vakfı  
tarafından düzenlenen panele hanımları bekliyoruz.

Mustafa DEMİR  
Fatih Belediye Başkanı

Prof. Dr. Faris KAYA  
İstanbul İlim ve Kültür Vakfı  
İcra Kurulu Başkanı

**Panelistler**

<b>MODERATÖR</b> : Emine EROĞLU / Editör - Yazar	<b>KONUŞMACILAR</b> :
<b>SUNUM</b> : Zahide Ülkü BAKİLER / Moral FM Programcısı	Nevval SEVİNDİ / Gazeteci - Yazar
	Sevda TÜRKÜSEV / TV Programcısı - Yazar
	Gölay ATASOY / Araştırmacı - Yazar
	Meryem AKBAL / Yumurcak TV Gen. Yay. Yönt.
	Meryem Aybike SİNAN / Moral FM Programcı - Yazar

**PROGRAM**

**TARİH** : 26 Haziran 2011 / Pazar

**KOKTEYL** : 13:00- 13:45 **PANEL** : 14:00 - 17:00

**YER** : FATİH ALİ EMİRİ KÜLTÜR MERKEZİ (Vatan cad. İst. Emn. Mdd. Yanı) Fatih

**LCV** : Ekrem Demir; ekremdemir@iikv.org / Tel : 0212 527 81 81 Fax: 0212 527 80 80

**İSTANBUL İLİM VE KÜLTÜR VAKFI**  
Kalenderhane Mah. Cüce Çeşmesi Sokak No:6 Vefa Fatih / İstanbul Web: www.iikv.org E-Mail: iikv@iikv.org

The Municipality of Fatih, in collaboration with the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture, invites female citizens to participate on a panel entitled “Bediüzzaman Said Nursi as a Role Model”.

## Appendix D



The Mayor of Fatih Mustafa Demir gives a speech at the opening ceremony of the Rustem Paşa Madrasa.

## Appendix E



The Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture thanks the Mayor of Fatih Mustafa Demir for the restoration of the Rustem Paşa Madrasa.

## Appendix Fi

### SAĞLIKLI NESİLLER DERNEĞİ İLE GAZİANTEP E TİPİ CEZA İNFAZ KURUMU

#### ARASINDAKİ İŞBİRLİĞİ PROTOKOLÜ

Sağlıklı Nesiller Derneği ile Gaziantep E Tipi Ceza İnfaz Kurumu arasında, karşılıklı işbirliği geliştirmek, Ceza İnfaz Kurumunda bulunan hükümlü ve tutukluların topluma kazandırılmaları amacıyla, aşağıdaki protokolün imzalanmasına karar verilmiştir.

**Kurumlar aşağıda belirtilen katkıları sağlamayı taahhüt etmektedirler:**

- 1) Sağlıklı Nesiller Derneği ve Gaziantep E Tipi Ceza İnfaz Kurumu, herhangi bir zamanda protokolde değişiklik önerisinde bulunabilir ve iki kurumun onayı alınmak kaydıyla protokolde değişiklikler yapabilir.
- 2) Bu protokolle Ceza İnfaz Kurumu kütüphanesinin geliştirilmesi ve zenginleştirilmesi sağlanacaktır.
- 3) Hükümlü ve tutuklulara okuma alışkanlığının kazandırılması için Sağlıklı Nesiller Derneği görevlileri eşliğinde Gaziantep E Tipi Ceza İnfaz Kurumunun izniyle uygun yerlerinde kitap okuma etkinliği düzenlenecektir.
- 4) Değişik konularda söyleşi ve konferanslar düzenlenmesi sağlanacaktır.
- 5) Bu protokol, iki kurum tarafından imzalandığı tarihten itibaren 1 yıl için geçerli olacaktır. Taraflarca talep edildiği takdirde bu süre uzatılabilecektir.
- 6) Taraflar işbu protokolün uygulanmasından doğabilecek her türlü uyuşmazlığı dostane ilişkiler çerçevesinde çözmeye azami gayret göstereceklerdir.

...../...../2012

Yener DOĞRUER  
Yönetim Kurulu Başkanı

...../...../2012

Kazım KAYA  
Kurum Müdürü



## **Appendix Fii**

### **Protocol of cooperation between the Association for Healthy Generations and the Gaziantep Department for the Enforcement of E-Kind Penalties.**

It has been decided that the following protocol is to be signed between the Association for Healthy Generations and the Gaziantep Department for the Enforcement of E-Kind Penalties, with the aim of developing mutual cooperation and ensuring the re-integration in society of convicts and prisoners who are detained in prisons under the jurisdiction of the Department for the Enforcement of Penalties.

#### **The parties commit to ensuring the following:**

**Article 1:** The Association for Healthy Generations and the Foundation for the Department for the Enforcement of E-Kind Penalties can propose changes to the protocol at any time and changes can be made to the protocol on agreement of the two parties

**Article 2:** With this protocol, it is ensured that the library of the Department for the Enforcement of Penalties will be developed and enriched.

**Article 3:** Book reading activities will be organised in appropriate places with the permission of the Department for the Enforcement of E-Kind Penalties and with the contribution of members of the Association for Healthy Generations with the aim of building the habit of reading among prisoners and convicts.

**Article 4:** Conferences and discussions on different topics will be organised.

**Article 5:** This protocol will be valid for a year starting from the date when it was signed by the two institutions. It can be prolonged on the agreement of both parties.

**Article 6:** An effort will be made to resolve in a friendly way any controversies resulting from the enforcement of this protocol.

.../.../2012  
Yener DOĞRUER  
President of the Administrative Board  
Department

.../.../2012  
Kazim KAYA  
Director of the



## Appendix Gi

### ÇOK SORULAN VE MERAK EDİLEN SORULAR

- 1- Kendi irademiz dışında geldiğimiz bir hayatı yaşıyoruz. Hayat nedir?
- 2- Özgürlük ve hürriyet sınırsız olabilir mi ?
- 3- Herşeyde kaide, kural veya görenek gibi şeyler insanı sıkıyor. Kanunlar ve kurallar niçin gerekli olmuştur ?
- 4- Her varlık bir faaliyet içinde olduğunu görüyoruz. İnsanlar vazifesiz ve gayesiz olabilir mi ?
- 5- Bir Yaratıcı var mıdır ? Biz neden göremiyoruz ?
- 6- Allah tek başına herşeyi nasıl yaratmıştır ?
- 7- Öldükten sonra yeni bir hayat var mıdır ? Mükafat veya ceza yeri yani Cennet ve Cehennem nerededir ?
- 8- Allah Yaratan ise, acaba Onu yaratan var mıdır ?
- 9- Peygamberler neden gönderilmiştir ? Onlar gerçekten elçi midir?
- 10- Melekler nasıl varlıklardır ? Neden gözüküyorlar ?
- 11- Kader nedir ? Alın yazısı ne demektir ?
- 12- Kader insanları mahkum eder mi? Herşey kaderimizde yazılı ise biz neden imtihan oluyoruz ?
- 13- Kur'an-ı kerim mucize midir ? Yani Allah sözü müdür ?
- 14- İbadet sadece namaz kılmak mıdır ? Neden ibadet yapmalıyız ?
- Allah'ın bizim ibadetimize ihtiyacı var mıdır ?
- 15- Oruç sadece aç kalmak mıdır ? Sonsuz istek ve arzularımızı doyumak mümkün mü ?
- 16- Fakirlerin ve zulme uğramışların acınacak hallerini nasıl kavrayabiliriz ? Zekat, sadaka vb. yardımlar neden verilmelidir ?
- 17- Güzel ve çirkin işler, günah ve sevablar nasıl kaydediliyor ?
- 18- Ölenler nereye gidiyorlar ? Kabirde azap ceza var mı?
- 19- Kalbi temiz olanlar ibadet yapmasa olur mu ?
- 20- Ahirete gidip gelen var mı ? Ölüm gerçeği nedir ?
- 21- Hıristiyan ve Yahudiler Cennete gidecekler mi?
- 22- Öldükten sonra ruhlar, tekrar dünyaya gelip insan olarak hayata devam ederler mi?
- 23- Kul hakkı neden önemlidir ? Mal edinme yani mülkiyet hakkı kutsal mıdır ? Neden ?
- 24- Şeytan ve kötü ruhlar var mıdır ? Niçin yaratılmışlardır ?
- 25- Yiyecekler topraktan geliyor, Allah'ın yaratması nasıl oluyor?

- 26- Uzayda başka canlılar var mı ? Dünyanın dışındaki alemler boş olabilir mi?
- 27- Çocuk yaşta ölenler Cennete mi gidiyor ?
- 28- Kıyamet nedir ? Dünyanın sonu var mıdır? Varsa ne zaman?
- 29- Ahir zaman nedir ? Kıyamete yakın insanları hangi tehlikeler bekliyor ? Peygamberimiz tehlikeleri bildirmiş mi ?
- 30- Azrail aynı anda birçok ruhu nasıl alabiliyor ?
- 31- Hayalimize her zaman iyi veya kötü, güzel veya çirkin şeyler geliyor. Bunlar nedir ve bunlardan sorumlu olur muyuz ?
- 32- Vücudumuzu ne kadar kontrol edebiliyoruz ? Bizim dediğimiz vücut ne kadar bizim ?
- 33- Bütün kutsal kitaplar yanında Kur'an-ı kerimin üstünlüğü nereden ileri geliyor ?
- NOT: Değerler eğitim programında bu suallerin de cevabını bulabilirsiniz. Zira soru sormasını bilin öğrenir.

## Appendix Gii

### Frequently asked questions

1. We live a life we came to beyond our willing. What is life?
2. Can liberty and freedom be limitless?
3. In any field of life, precepts, rules and conventions hassle people. Why are laws and rules necessary?
4. We see that every living being is busy with some kind of activity. Can human beings be without a mission and purpose?
5. Is there a Creator? Why can't we see Him?
6. How could Allah create everything by Himself?
7. Is there life after death? Where is the place of reward and punishment, Paradise and Hell?
8. If Allah is the Creator, is there anybody who created Him?
9. Why were Prophets sent to people? Are they really messengers?
10. What kind of beings are Angels? Why can't they be seen?
11. What is Destiny? What does Predestination mean?
12. Does Destiny convict people? If everything is written in our Destiny, why are we being tested?
13. Is the Quran a miracle? Is it the word of Allah?
14. Is worship just ritual prayer? Why do we have to perform religious obligation? Does Allah need our worship?
15. Is fasting just not eating? Is it possible to satisfy our wishes and desires without limit?
16. How can we make sense of the deplorable conditions of the poor and persecuted? Why do we have to give help like ritual alms and charity?
17. How can good and bad deeds be enlisted as credits or sins?
18. Where do dead people go? Is there torment and punishment in the grave?
19. Can those who have a pure heart not worship?
20. Are there people who came back from the hereafter? What is the reality of death?
21. Will Christians and Jews go to Paradise?
22. Can souls come again to this world after death and continue their life as people?

23. Why are people's rights important? Is acquisition of goods, that is, property rights, sacred? Why?
24. Do Satan and bad spirits exist? Why were they created?
25. Food comes from the soil, how was Allah's creation made possible?
26. Are there other beings in the space? Can the universe outside the Earth be empty?
27. Do humans who die as children go to Paradise?
28. What is the Doomsday? Does the world have an end? If yes, when?
29. What is the Day of the Judgment? What perils do people face when the Doomsday is close? Did our Prophets inform us about these perils?
30. How can Azrael be different spirits at the same time?
31. In our dreams we always see good or bad, beautiful or ugly things. What are they and are we responsible for them?
32. How much can we control our body? How much does our body really belong to us?
33. Why is the Quran superior to all the other holy books?

NOTE: You can find the answer to these questions in the programme "Education to Values". Because people learn by asking questions.



# Appendix H

11/04/2013 15:09

830

## T.C. ISPARTA KÜLTÜR EĞİTİM VAKFI

Sıra No	Uygulanması planlanan programın veya faaliyetin konusu:	Uygulanması planlanan programın veya faaliyetin amacı:	Uygulanması planlanan programın tarihi:	Uygulanması planlanan programın sunacak kişinin adı soyadı:	Uygulanması planlanan programın sunacak kişinin unvan- çalıştığı kurum	Eğitim yöntemi ve teknikleri:	Katılması hedef hükmü ve tutuklu sayısı:	Kullanılacak araç ve gereçler:
1			05.02.2013 Saat:10.45	1. Grup	1. Grup			
2			05.02.2013 Saat:14.00	6. Grup	6. Grup			
3			07.02.2013 Saat:10.45	2. Grup	2. Grup	Söyleşi,		
4			07.02.2013 Saat:14.00	3. Grup	3. Grup	Soru cevap,		
5			12.02.2013 Saat:10.45	1. Grup	1. Grup	Örnek	90 – 100 kişi	Bilgisayar, Projeksiyon, Flaş bellek, Kitap, Broşür, Ders notları, Fotokopi
6			12.02.2013 Saat:14.00	5. Grup	5. Grup	oyunlar		
7			14.02.2013 Saat:10.45	4. Grup	4. Grup			
8			14.02.2013 Saat:14.00	7. Grup	7. Grup			
9			19.02.2013 Saat:10.45	1. Grup	1. Grup			
10			19.02.2013 Saat:14.00	6. Grup	6. Grup			
11			21.02.2013 Saat:10.45	2. Grup	2. Grup			
12			21.02.2013 Saat:14.00	3. Grup	3. Grup			
13			26.02.2013 Saat:10.45	1. Grup	1. Grup			
14			26.02.2013 Saat:14.00	5. Grup	5. Grup			
15			28.02.2013 Saat:10.45	4. Grup	4. Grup			
16			28.02.2013 Saat:14.00	7. Grup	7. Grup			
17			21.02.2013 Saat:10.45	9. Grup	9. Grup	Söyleşi,		Bilgisayar, Projeksiyon, Flaş bellek, Kitap, Broşür, Ders notları, Fotokopi
18			21.02.2013 Saat:14.00	9. Grup	9. Grup	Örnek	25-30 kişi kadın	
19			12.02.2013 Saat:10.45	8. Grup	8. Grup	oyunlar		
20			26.02.2013 Saat:10.45	8. Grup	8. Grup		15-20 çocuk	

Not : Program sunucularının mazereti halinde diğer gruplardan birisi veya birkaç grupları programı icra ile görevlidir.

Hazırlayan:  
Bayram VAROL

## Appendix İi

### HASAN KALYONCU ÜNİVERSİTESİ İLE GAZİANTEP İL MİLLİ EĞİTİM MÜDÜRLÜĞÜ ARASINDAKİ İŞBİRLİĞİ PROTOKOLÜ

Hasan Kalyoncu Üniversitesi ile Gaziantep İl Milli Eğitim Müdürlüğü arasında, Üniversitenin bütün bölümlerinde okutulan “**Toplumsal Duyarlılık Projeleri**” dersi kapsamında, üniversite öğrencilerinin de katkılarıyla, ilköğretim ve liselerde “**Öğrencileri Toplumsal Hayata Hazırlamak ve Meslek Seçimlerinde Yardımcı Olmak**” amacıyla protokol imzalanmasına karar verilmiştir.

**Madde 1** Öğrencilerin zamanlarının uygun olduğu haftanın belirli gün ve saatlerinde **Konferans ve Söyleşi** etkinlikleri düzenlenecektir.

**Madde 2** Milli Eğitim Müdürlüğünün himayelerinde, ilgili okul müdürlüğünün sorumluluğu, haftalık konferans veya söyleşi yapılacak salonu ayarlayıp, öğrencilerin burada toplanmasını sağlamaktır. Hasan Kalyoncu Üniversitesi’nin sorumluluğu ise; konferans ve söyleşi yapacak kişinin belirlenmesi ve en güzel şekilde sunumun yapılmasıdır.

**Madde 3** Lise öğrencilerinin motivasyonlarının artırılması ve kariyer konusunda bilgilendirilmeleri amacıyla, üniversiteyi ziyaret edip fakülte, bölüm ve meslekleri yakından tanımaları sağlanacaktır.

**Madde 4** Gaziantep İl Milli Eğitim Müdürlüğü’nün uygun göreceği kütüphanelere kitap kazandırılmasına gayret edilecektir.

**Madde 5** İlköğretim ve Lise öğrencilerine kitap okuma alışkanlığının kazandırılması amacıyla faydalı kitapların temin edilmesi ve bu kitapların Milli Eğitim Müdürlüğü aracılığıyla öğrencilere ulaştırılması sağlanacaktır.

**Madde 6** Bu protokol, iki kurum tarafından imzalandığı tarihten itibaren 1 yıl için geçerli olacaktır. Taraflarca talep edildiği takdirde bu süre uzatılabilecektir. Herhangi bir zamanda iki kurumun mutabakatıyla bu protokolde değişiklikler yapılabilir. Anlaşmazlıklar dostane ilişkilerle çözülecektir.

**Madde 7** Her iki taraf da protokolün orijinal kopyasını elinde bulunduracaktır.

10/10/2012

**Ekrem SERİN**

**İl Milli Eğitim Müdürü**

10/10/2012

**Prof.Dr. İbrahim ÖZDEMİR**

**Rektör**

## Appendix Iii

### **Protocol of cooperation between the Hasan Kalyoncu University and the Gaziantep Provincial Directorate of National Education.**

It has been decided that a protocol is to be signed between the Hasan Kalyoncu University and the Gaziantep Provincial Directorate of National Education with the aim of “**Preparing Students for Social Life and Helping Them in the Choice of a Profession**”. The programme will be activated for elementary school, middle school and high school students in addition to the lessons held with university students as part of the “**Project for Social Sensitivity**” carried out in all the faculties of the [Hasan Kalyoncu] University.

**Article 1:** Activities like **Conferences** and **Conversations** will be planned once a week on a specified day and time that is convenient for the students.

**Article 2:** Under the patronage of the Directorate of National Education, the responsibility of the principal’s office of the school in question will be to prepare the room where the weekly conference or conversation will be held and to ensure the gathering of students in the room. The responsibility of Hasan Kalyoncu University will be to designate the speaker for the conference or the conversation and to prepare the presentation in the best possible way.

**Article 3:** It will be ensured that high school students will visit the University and get to know faculties, departments and professions with the aim of increasing their motivation and informing them on career possibilities.

**Article 4:** An effort will be made for the acquisition by the [high schools] libraries of books that the Gaziantep Provincial Directorate of National Education finds appropriate.

**Article 5:** With the aim of building reading habits in elementary school, middle school, and high school students, it will be ensured that useful books will be provided to students through the Directorate of National Education.

**Article 6:** This protocol will be valid for a year starting from the date when it was signed by the two institutions. It can be prolonged if both parties agree. Changes can be made to this protocol at anytime if there is an agreement between the parties. Controversies will be solved in a friendly way.



**Article 7:** Both parties will have an original copy of the protocol.

10/10/2012  
Ekrem Serin  
Özdemir  
Provincial Directorate of National Education  
University

10/10/2012  
Prof. Ibrahim  
Hasan Kalyoncu

## Appendix Ji

KİMDEN : KALYON İNS. SAN. VE TİC. A.Ş.

FAKS NO. : 0342 3212103

EKL. 18 2012 14:32

S1

T.C.  
GAZİANTEP VALİLİĞİ  
Milli Eğitim Müdürlüğü

Sayı : B.08.4.MEM.4.27.00.4.1.300.12/  
Konu : Toplumsal Duyarlılık Projesi

34543 18.10.2012

HASAN KALYONCU ÜNİVERSİTENE  
GAZİANTEP

Hasan Kalyoncu Üniversitesi ile Müdürlüğümüz arasında 10.10.2012 tarihinde imzalanan **Toplumsal Duyarlılık Projesi** konulu protokol uyarınca 2012-2013 eğitim-öğretim yılından itibaren başlatılan **Toplumsal Duyarlılık Projesi** dersi kapsamında, Üniversite öğrencilerinin de katkılarıyla ilköğretim, ortaokul ve lise düzeyinde **Öğrencileri Toplumsal Hayata Hazırlamak ve Meslek Seçimlerinde Yardımcı Olmak** amacıyla yapılacak etkinliklerin okullarda eğitim öğretim aksatılmadan okul müdürlüğünün sorumluluğunda ve uygun görülen zamanlarda yapılması 16/10/2012 tarihli ve 34195 sayılı Valilik Oluru ile uygun görülmüş olup, onay örneği ekte gönderilmiştir.

Bilgilerinizi ve gereğini rica ederim.

  
Fikret ATAĞ  
Vali a.  
Milli Eğitim Müdürü V.

EK :  
- Valilik Oluru (1 sayfa)



Adres : Yeni Valilik Binası 3. Kat Büyükşehir/GAZİANTEP  
Ayrıntılı bilgi için irtibat : Şube Müdürü Yalçın KAZAK - Kültür Şefi Erol TAŞDEMİR  
Telefon : (0342) 231 10 58 - 232 03 07 Belgegeçer: (0342) 232 24 10  
E-Posta : gaziantepmem@meh.gov.tr  
Genel Ağ : http://gaziantep.meb.gov.tr



No. 9043 P. 1

İL MİLLİ EĞİTİM GAZİANTEP 3422322410

18.10.2012 14:30

## Appendix Jii

TURKISH REPUBLIC  
Gaziantep Governor's Office  
Directorate of National Education

To the Hasan Kalyoncu University of Gaziantep

In accordance with the protocol titled “**Project for Social Sensitivity**”, signed on October 10<sup>th</sup> 2012 between the Hasan Kalyoncu University and our Directorate, we consented, through the Governor's Office Approval n. 34195 dated October 16<sup>th</sup> 2012, which is sent as an attachment, to the organisation of activities in elementary schools, middle schools and high schools, in addition to the lessons that, starting from the academic year 2012-2013, are being held with university students as part of the “**Project for Social Sensitivity**”. These activities will be organised with the aim of “**Preparing Students for Social Life and Helping Them in the Choice of a Profession**”, during appropriate days and times, under the responsibility of the schools' Principal's Offices, and without interfering with the teaching and learning occupations of the school.

I kindly ask for due documentation.

Friket ATAK  
Governor

## Appendix Ki

### SAĞLIKLI NESİLLER DERNEĞİ İLE GAZİANTEP POLİS MESLEK YÜKSEKOKULU MÜDÜRLÜĞÜ ARASINDAKİ İŞBİRLİĞİ PROTOKOLÜ

**Sağlıklı Nesiller Derneği ile Gaziantep Polis Meslek Yüksekokulu (PMYO) arasında “Öğrencileri Toplumsal Hayata Hazırlamak ve Sağlıklı Kalmalarına Yardımcı Olmak” amacıyla protokol imzalanmasına karar verilmiştir.**

**Madde 1** Öğrencilerin zamanlarının uygun olduğu haftanın belirli gün ve saatlerinde **Konferans ve Söyleşi** etkinlikleri düzenlenecektir.

**Madde 2** PMYO müdürlüğünün sorumluluğu, haftalık konferans veya söyleşi yapılacak salonu ayarlayıp, öğrencilerin burada toplanmasını sağlamaktır. **Sağlıklı Nesiller Derneği**’nin sorumluluğu ise; konferans ve söyleşi yapacak kişinin belirlenmesi ve en güzel şekilde sunumun yapılmasıdır.

**Madde 3** PMYO kütüphanesine kitap kazandırılmasına gayret edilecektir.

**Madde 4** Bu protokol, iki kurum tarafından imzalandığı tarihten itibaren 1 yıl için geçerli olacaktır. Taraflarca talep edildiği takdirde bu süre uzatılabilecektir. Herhangi bir zamanda iki kurumun mutabakatıyla bu protokolde değişiklikler yapılabilir. Anlaşmazlıklar dostane ilişkilerle çözülecektir.

**Madde 5** Her iki taraf da protokolün orijinal kopyasını elinde bulunduracaktır.

..../03/2013

**Yener DOĞRUER**

**Başkan**

..../03/2013

**Osman METLİ**

**Müdür**

## **Appendix Kii**

### **Protocol of cooperation between the Association for Healthy Generations and the Directorate of the Police Academy.**

It has been decided that a protocol is to be signed between the Association for Healthy Generations and the Gaziantep Police Academy (GPA) with the aim of “**Preparing Students for Social Life and Helping Them to Stay Healthy**”.

**Article 1:** Activities like **Conferences** and **Conversations** will be planned once a week on a specified day and time that is convenient for the students.

**Article 2:** The responsibility of the GPA will be to prepare the room where the weekly conference or conversation will be held and to ensure the gathering of students in the room. The responsibility of the Association for Healthy Generations will be to designate the speaker for the conference or the conversation and to prepare the presentation in the best possible way.

**Article 3:** An effort will be made for the acquisition of books by the GPA library.

**Article 4:** This protocol will be valid for a year starting from the date when it was signed by the two institutions. It can be prolonged if both parties agree. Changes can be made to this protocol any time if there is an agreement between the parties. Controversies will be solved in a friendly way.

**Article 5:** Both parties will have an original copy of the protocol.

.../03/2013  
**Yener DOĞER**  
**President**

.../03/2013  
**Osman METLI**  
**Director**

## Appendix Li



T.C.  
AİLE VE  
SOSYAL POLİTİKALAR  
BAKANLIĞI



mutlu  
yuva  
mutlu  
yaşam  
derneği

**AİLE VE SOSYAL POLİTİKALAR BAKANLIĞI  
ÇOCUK HİZMETLERİ GENEL MÜDÜRLÜĞÜ  
İLE  
ANKARA MUTLU YUVA MUTLU YAŞAM DERNEĞİ  
ARASINDA  
ÇOCUK EVLERİ AÇILMASI VE İŞLETİLMESİNE İLİŞKİN  
İŞBİRLİĞİ PROTOKOLÜ**

**2013  
Ankara**

## **Appendix Lii**

### **Protocol of Cooperation between the General Directorate of Children's Affairs of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies of the Republic of Turkey and the Happy Nest Happy Life Association Regarding the Opening and Management of Children's Houses.**

#### **TOPIC**

##### **Article 1:**

This protocol is signed to establish cooperation between the General Directorate of Children's Affairs of the Ministry of Family and Social Affairs of the Republic of Turkey and the Happy Nest Happy Life Association regarding the opening and management of children's houses

#### **AIM**

##### **Article 2:**

This protocol regards children under the jurisdiction of the Law n. 5395 for the Protection of Children and the Law n. 2828 for Social Services. The aim of the protocol is to allow these children to conduct their lives, not in communal institutions, but in home-like environments, where their basic needs can be met, and to be looked after in independent structures or apartments situated in neighbourhoods where they can be integrated in society. The aim of the protocol is also to make sure that children gain good habits; develop a healthy personality during their social, intellectual and physical growth; and learn by experience our social values together with concepts like relations with neighbours and friendships.

#### **LEGAL BASES**

##### **Article 3:**

This protocol has been drafted according to the principles expressed in the fourth article of the Law n. 2828 for Social Services Institutions and in the Law n. 5395 for the Protection of Children.

#### **DEFINITIONS AND COMPENDIUM**

##### **Article 4:**

- 34. Ministry: Ministry of Family and Social Policies,
- 35. General Directorate: General Directorate of Children's Affairs,
- 36. Association: Happy Nest Happy Life Association,
- 37. Provincial Directorate: Provincial Directorate of Family and Social Policies,
- 38. Institutions: Children's Houses and Education Dorms,
- 39. Children's Houses: Independent apartments situated in areas of the province appropriate to raising kids from a social and cultural point of view and preferably close to schools and hospitals where 5 to 8 children reside,

40. Person responsible for the children's house: person responsible for the management of the services carried out in the children's house, within the framework of the pertinent laws,
41. House's mother and care workers: staff responsible for the care and the growth of the children resident in children's houses
42. General headquarter of Children's Houses: Center established with the aim of ensuring coordination among children's houses and the tracking, control and fulfilment of all kinds of procedures and expenses regarding the planning, the opening and the management of the houses,
43. Volunteer Family: the authorized family that takes out children who are not visited often by their family and who cannot benefit from adoption; social investigation and observations are conducted to make sure that the designated family is able to take on the responsibility of surveillance and care of the child assigned to it.

## **ADDRESSES**

### **Article 5:**

#### **General Directorate**

Anafartlar Caddesi N. 68 Altındağ/Ulus/Ankara

Tel: 0312 310 24 60

#### **Haapy Nest Happy Life Association**

İstoç 25. Ada Sonu Kuzey Plaza K:8 D:15 Bağcılar/İstanbul

Tel: 0212 659 59 30 – 40 Fax: 0212 659 20 22

## **RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PARTIES**

### **Article 6:**

#### **A) Responsibilities of the General Directorate:**

44. Ensuring the functioning of the cooperation according to the aims and rules of the protocol
45. Giving its opinion through written statements regarding solutions to controversies generated by the enforcement of the protocol,
46. Giving permission, when found appropriate, to take pictures and shoot videos regarding education, research, promotion and activities with children.

#### **B) Responsibilities of the Provincial Directorate**

47. Ensuring the functioning of the children's houses according to the rules,
48. Employing the house mother, care workers and educator of values found appropriate among those indicated by the Provincial Directorate or proposed by the Association,
49. Evaluating, together with the coordinator of the association, issues regarding the layoff or the transfer of care workers employed in the children's houses
50. Covering, according to the rules, the expenses for the subsistence and accommodation of children living in the houses
51. Educating the staff employed or assigned to the children's houses with the total contribution of the Association



52. Sharing the necessary information to be used in the developments of the children, medical care and rehabilitation programmes, respecting the confidentiality principles of the employed psychologist
53. Giving to the General Directorate the information received from the Association regarding the children's houses to be opened within a year in collaboration with the Association
54. Giving the approval for the employment in the children's homes of psychologists and experts in behavioural science who are proposed by the Association and whose wages and employee rights are paid by the Association
55. Giving the approval for employment in case it is desired that care workers or professional figures (social workers, psychological counselling and guidance experts, children's educators, teachers and educators to values), whose wages and employee rights are paid by the Association, are employed for the benefit of children in need, out of the staff hired in the children's houses by the General Directorate.

### **C) Responsibilities of the Association**

56. Covering the expenses related to the rent, furnishing, equipping, maintenance and cleaning of the children's houses, for the entire duration of the service
57. Taking care of all the other needs that cannot be covered because of the children's houses' rules and that might cause delay in the service
58. Helping children to find a job and establish a house when they leave the house following their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday or the revoking of the tribunal's decision regarding custody
59. Covering the expenses that exceed the amount to be paid, according to the pertinent laws and regulations by the general Directorate
60. Arranging cultural, social and sports activities and trips for children who live in the houses or in the institutions, after obtaining the necessary permits and registration documents,
61. Deciding in association with the centre of coordination of the children's houses and the employee of the association the method of education that will be given in addition to the education received by children in schools on topics like behavioural education, health education, road safety, education on values etc. The expenses relative to the staff employed for these educational activities will be covered by the Association,
62. In addition to covering the expenses for the wage and the employee rights of one supervisor every 7 houses, giving the approval for the employment of psychologists or experts in behavioural sciences,
63. Covering the expenses for the wages and the employee rights of care workers or professional figures (social workers, psychological counselling and guidance experts, children's educators, teacher and educators of values) hired for the benefits of children in need, besides the staff hired in the houses by the General Directorate. Asking for the approval in this area of the Provincial Directorate
64. Coordinating with the Provincial Directorate the efforts to find volunteer families who can serve as "Protecting Families" for the children who live in the houses.

## **FULFILMENT**

### **Article 7:**

65. Administrators and members of the Association will manage through cooperation and coordination all the activities organised in the children's houses and for the children who live in the house according to the regulations and by obtaining permits from the people responsible for the children's houses and from the centre of coordination among the houses.
66. In case members of the Association and the centre of coordination of the children's houses notice behaviour that does not conform to this protocol, they should first try to find a solution by consulting the administration of the Association. In case the problem persists, in order to ensure the continuity of the service in the children's houses and the benefits for children, the decisions taken in consultation with the coordination centre of the children's houses, the person responsible for the children's house in question and the coordinator of the association will be enforced.
67. Volunteer families can visit the houses as guests if found appropriate from a psychological point of view that the children spend time with a family, within the framework of the pertinent regulation and by taking into consideration the views of the pertinent professional figures who work in the houses. The responsibilities of the volunteer families are indicated above.
68. The coordination centre for the children's houses, in coordination with the people responsible for the houses in question, draft a programme of authorized visits when it is found appropriate, within the framework of the regulations, that the children meet with their families and/or relatives. The visits paid within this programme are organised together with the psychologist appointed by the association and with the person responsible for the house.
69. In collaboration with the association, efforts will be made to ensuring that the programme of socio-cultural activities organised for the children is respected.
70. Within the framework of the pertinent regulations of the General Directorate, the Association submits to the children's house coordination centre all sorts of donations and help and support through provisions for the children or the children's houses in exchange for receipts or invoices of transportation expenses. Taking into consideration children's social development and psychological characteristics, permission will not be given to distribute the donations by people in charge of managing the donations, members and donors in a way that will generate emotional and psychological problems by weakening and hurting the children or damaging their honour.
71. The Association may support, within its own structure or in coordination with other NGOs, courses and activities that will improve the personal development of the children that live in the children's houses and that will help them learn a profession and obtain a job in the future by contributing to their education, in particular their education on rights.
72. The administrators, members and volunteers of the Association can visit the houses as guests within the time frame indicated by the children's houses coordination centre and the workers of the association in coordination with each other. Efforts will be

made to organise these visits in the form of family visits that can turn into the practice of Turkish customs, manners, and traditions.

73. The expert psychologist of behavioural science that will be employed in the children's house will work in coordination with the person responsible for the house in question and the children's houses coordination centre. He or she will submit to the children's houses coordination centre the reports prepared on children and the children's personal dossiers, which will be filed.

## **TIME SPAN**

### **Article 8:**

The time span of this protocol is 20 years. If it is not notified with a written statement that the contract will not be renewed at least three months before its expiration the provisions of the protocol will be valid for another 20 years.

## **ADJUNCTIONS TO THE PROTOCOL AND CANCELLATION**

### **Article 9:**

74. During the enforcement of the protocol, the parties can at anytime make changes or additions to it with the aim of offering better services.
75. In case the parties do not respect their rights and responsibilities, cancellation of the protocol might be requested by both parties. If one of the party wants to put an end to the protocol, it has to notify this decision at least three months in advance in order to execute all the necessary procedures, ensuring the continuation of the service in the children's houses and protecting the children's benefits.

## **RESOLUTION OF CONTROVERSIES**

### **Article 10:**

76. Controversies generated by the enforcement of this protocol will be solved by a committee made up of, for each party, two expert people in the field, as indicated by the Provincial Directorate and the Association.
77. In case the committee is not able to find a solution, the General Directorate can appeal to court.
78. In case controversies generated by the enforcement of this protocol are brought to court, the Provincial Tribunals of Ankara will be commissioned.

## **OTHER ISSUES**

### **Article 11:**

All the issues not covered in this protocol will be managed according to the pertinent regulations.

## **ADDRESS AND NOTIFICATION**

### **Article 12:**

The parties accept the addresses indicated in Article 5 of this protocol as legal notification addresses to send the notifications and announcements necessary to put into practice the provisions defined in this protocol. It is stipulated that, if the parties do not notify change of address with a written statement, the addresses indicated in this protocol will be valid for notifications and announcements.

## **EXECUTION**

### **Article 13:**

The provisions of this protocol will be executed by the General Directorate and the Association.

## **ENFORCEMENT**

### **Article 14:**

79. The adjunctive protocol dated 17.08.2011 and the Protocol of Cooperation dated 23.08.2010 signed between the Directorate of Social Service of the Governorate of Istanbul and the Happy Nest Happy Life Association regarding the opening and management of children houses is terminated.
80. This protocol, prepared in two copies and consisting of 14 articles, comes into effect the day after it is signed by the parties.

**Prof. K. Nevzat TARHAN**  
**President of the Happy Life**  
**Happy Nest Association**

**Abdulkadir KAYA**  
**General Director of the**  
**Children's Services**

## **APPROVAL**

**13/04/2013**

**Kenan BOZGEYIK**

**Permanent Undersecretary**

## Appendix M



A political cartoon, published in the Yeni Asya newspaper on March 29<sup>th</sup> 2014, the day before particularly heated local elections, represents the leader of the Democrat Party Gültekin Uysal saying: “Stop Now. Let the Democrats speak”. In the background a cassette tape and the icons of You Tube and Twitter slashed by two arrows are references respectively to the investigations that resulted in anti-graft raids against politicians and businessmen close to the JDP and to the consequent ban on You Tube and Twitter imposed by the party. The cartoon expresses support for the DP and simultaneously criticises both the Fetullah Gülen Community who supposedly conducted the investigations and the JDP.